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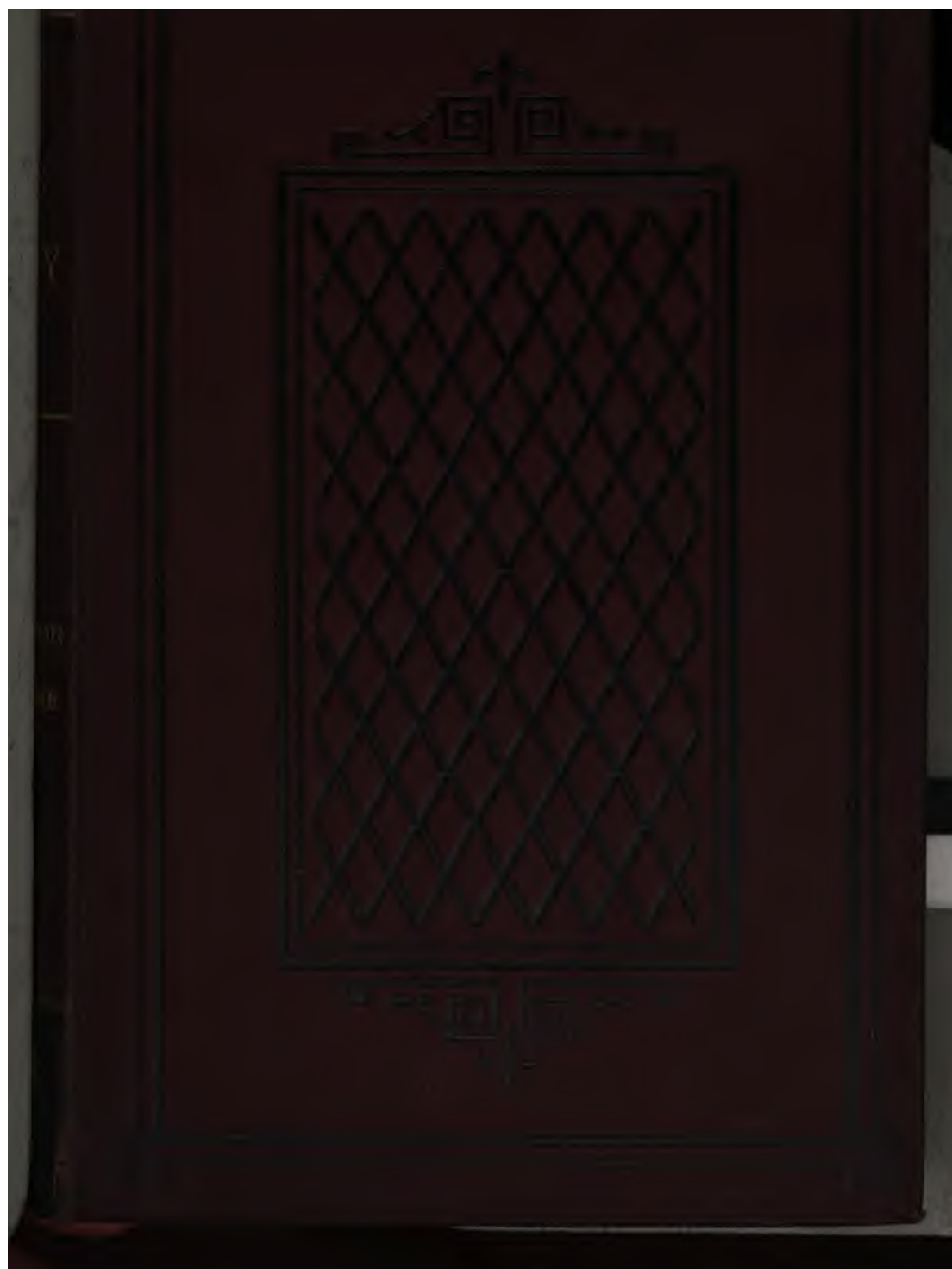
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OLD † QUARRY.

OLD + QUARRY.

A Nobel.

BY

GERALD GRANT,

AUTHOR OF "COMING HOME TO ROOST."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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OLD + QUARRY.

CHAPTER I.



AD! Yes, Arden Graemes, her husband, was mad. His mother had said so, and she believed her. There was no mistaking that wild look and cry of despair—the man to whom she had sacrificed all else, home, parents—a love as true as man ever gave to woman—her own maiden pride, and the prejudices of her class, was a madman! His genius, his fine words, his mystic love for her, his dreams, his mission, all was madness! She had never seen a madman before she had seen him, but she had heard such spoken of with terror and loathing, and her husband was mad! His own mother had said so, and she believed her. That one word had opened her eyes, had explained all that had before been dark. His strange erratic ways, the wild splendour of thought and look she had so admired, his conduct towards herself, so cold, so unloverlike. He was not cruel or wicked, he was not good or great either, he was only mad; she understood it all now!

It was many hours since the word had been spoken that for ever destroyed the future she had built up for herself, making of it a heap of ghastly ruins hideous to look upon ; and she now sat alone, locked into the room that the mother had told her was Arden's—her husband's!—not daring to look forward, still less daring to look back.

Very tender had the madman's mother been with her, very tender and pitying. "Such a marriage could not hold good," she said ; "she herself would write to Miss Rhoda's parents, and they would come and fetch her ; or better still, she must go at once to them without writing, and they could make the whole thing public—say that her boy was mad—her poor unhappy boy !—and she would be free, free to marry another and be happy ; and he would be taken from her and put into a madhouse, and there he would soon die—they would both die, he and she—and the sooner the better, the sooner the better !" And even as she said so, the poor mother burst out crying, and held out to the woman he had so wronged her trembling hands, begging her to have pity on her boy—her poor mad boy, who was so good, and had suffered so much ! Then, as she caught the look of blank despair in the young wife's face, she once more forgot herself and her son in sympathy for her, and said it was a wicked and cruel thing that had been done, the taking the poor young thing from her happy home to break her heart ; but she should go back and tell her parents all—yes, yes, of

course, and then it would be right, and she would be happy once more—right, when the wrong had been so great! Rhoda knew better; she knew that it could never again be right for her—never—never. But she got up from her knees when Arden's mother told her to, and she said quite quietly, though in a voice that was not at all hers, so hard and tuneless did it sound—that she must not write—she would write herself; and then she was taken into another room, so clean and fresh, where a bright fire burnt, the room in which she now sat—her husband's room! Shivering with cold and dread she sat herself down before the fire, and when Mrs. Graemes suggested her being left alone to write, she answered in the same dull listless tone, that she would be glad to be alone. And Mrs. Graemes, having left the room with noiseless tread, and many a wistful backward look, she got up and locked the door, then returned to her seat, and there, pale and motionless, with low bowed head and hands tight writhed together, she had sat for hours. How many hours? She did not know, she did not care. What mattered time to her now? At first she had been reminded of it by the sharp ticking of a small clock on the mantelpiece, but she had got up and turned it down upon its face, and since then time had ceased for her—time, yes, but not thought. Oh, why could not that cease too? Why could she not go mad when the word burnt into her brain and sickened at her heart—why could she not go *mad* and forget?

She had said this to herself in the first moments of despairing agony, but the thought had long since passed away, and her mind was clear now, clearer than it had been for months, clearer perhaps than it had ever been before. She knew that she should not go mad, or die of a broken heart, but live on to suffer, and if God had mercy on her, to repent. All that she had not dared to face through the past weeks of feverish excitement she could face steadily and unflinchingly now. The life she had thrown away was the life that God had given her, a life with father and mother and poor despised Frank, whose true honest love was lost to her for ever, with the rest. As for Arden Graemes, the ideal hero love at whose feet she had worshipped in trembling adoration, he was not great or sublime, he was only mad. He would not take her to London to make a fine lady of her; he had not married her for love, as Frank would have done, but because he was mad. Now that he had got her he would not kill her, or do her any greater injury than he had already done, for his mother had said that he was gentle and good, and she believed her in this too. He had broken her heart and destroyed her life—the life that without him had been so beautiful; but that was because he was mad—mad!

So she sat on through the long hours, and thought—not shedding a tear, or uttering an audible cry in her despair—not raving or cursing or praying. The last time she had prayed or used the form of prayer was that morning

when she knelt beside *him* at the altar and swore to serve, love, honour and keep him in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others keep only unto him so long as they should both live, promises that had seemed so natural then, that seemed so monstrous now !

Several times in the course of the afternoon there had come gentle tappings at the door, and a low, tremulous voice had uttered her name, adding to it each time a faltering question—Was the letter ready? Was she lying down? Would she not have something to eat? Would she not open the door?

No, Rhoda did not open the door, she did not even move; only once or twice she moved her head slightly towards the sound. Through all the long, awful hours she had only risen once, when she turned the clock down upon its face.

And so evening deepened into night—her wedding night, and Christmas Eve! She did not think of this until, sitting there as she had sat for hours, rigid, motionless, feeling neither cold nor hunger, nor anything but despair, upon the pulseless stillness of the night, broke clear and sweet the Christmas wake—a chorus of voices, young and old, telling the story of that far-off eastern night at Bethlehem, when the shepherds watched their flocks, and the mother watched her child, and the star of faith shone bright over the plain and the stable.

Year after year she had listened to the same story sung beneath the windows of her home—

the old home ! And sometimes, because so wild and solemn, it had affected her to tears. It is so easy to cry when we are happy, and have nothing to cry about. She did not cry now, but as the notes swelled out loud, clear, and exultant, the thought of all she had lost rose before her as in a vision—the lost home, the lost happiness, the lost love—and sinking slowly from the chair to the ground, she lay along it, her arms outstretched, her face crushed down upon them like one dead.

Could shame or sorrow sink her lower?—poor erring, broken-hearted Rhoda !

The voices died away in the distance, and all was still once more—so still ! Within and without—without the stillness of the night, within the stillness of despair.

So passed the night, her wedding night, and morning broke—Christmas morning ! The cold grey winter dawn looked in through the uncurtained window—darkness grew into shadow, and shadow into familiar objects, and still Rhoda lay along the ground, her face crushed down upon it.

By-and-by, as dawn brightened into the pale, chill light of an early winter morning, the tappings, so often unheeded, came again to the door ; and the faint, tremulous questions, too—

“ Are you there, Miss Rhoda ? Wont you let me in ? Oh, do ! I feel so frightened, so miserable ! ” And then the weak shaky voice broke down altogether, and there was a sound of subdued hysterical sobbing. But no change came

over the grey ashen face, though it had been slightly lifted from her hands. Of what avail were tears and prayers—of what avail was anything now?

In an agony of nervous fear, not knowing what to do, or what awful thing might not be going on in the room where so deathlike a silence reigned, the widow knelt down upon the threshold, humbling herself to the dust before the girl who might have been her own child. Had she not, poor bairn, been wronged—irreparably wronged by her son—was it not right and just, then, that she, his mother, should humble herself before her? She told her this: told her that she was kneeling out there in her age and weakness, and would not rise until she had pity on her and opened her the door.

But Rhoda did not move; she had brought shame and disgrace upon her own parents without remorse. "What was his mother's shame to her?"

"Think of your own mother, dear," pleaded the widow, her voice fainter because of the tears that choked it; "of all her love and care of you, you wouldn't lock your door upon her, or leave her to kneel outside, would you?"

Then Rhoda, thinking of that mother's love and care, and of her sorrow too, rose mechanically, and opened the door to Arden's mother. She came in softly, looking so mournful in her shabby widow's weeds, her thin pale face, swollen lids, and hands still clasped in supplication. "I wont worry you, dear," she said, meekly; "I'll

go away as soon as you tell me to, indeed I will ; but I was so frightened, I couldn't bear it any longer. And you haven't been to bed, and the fire's out and—and—don't you think it would be better if you were to go home at once, before he comes ? and then no one need know anything until you have told your father all, and he has settled what had best be done. It is a cruel wicked business ! but he did not mean you any harm—he never did harm to any one—he was always gentle and good, and so I thought—oh, my boy, my poor unhappy boy ! how could you ?”

“He is mad,” said Rhoda. Was it said in excuse or in scorn ? Mrs. Graemes was startled by the dreary hopelessness of the tone, and turned a questioning look on the girl's face. Little of it was to be seen. She sat back in the great old-fashioned arm-chair beside the empty grate, her head sunk down upon her breast, her eyes fixed with a blank stare upon the hands that, tight locked together, rested in her lap.

“May I sit down ?” asked Arden's mother ; “only just a little moment ? My knees tremble so ; they always do when I'm agitated.” There was no answer, not even by a look, and finding it quite impossible to stand, the widow dropped into the chair that stood nearest to the door, sitting only on the extreme edge, too nervous and miserable to think of making herself comfortable.

“If you could get away,” she began again, apparently relieved by the sound of her own voice, “before he comes. I'm not afraid of him ;

he would not say anything to me. It was for my sake he did it. He saw that I was getting old, and weak and nervous, and he wished me to find at last a home and rest; but he knew that I would not leave him alone in his sorrow, so he looked out for some one to take my place."

Slowly the clasped hands dropped away from each other, and rose, outspread, to meet the shame-dyed face that bent lower and lower till it was hidden away in them. "To take her place!—his own words—oh, woe—woe!"

"Oh, Miss Rhoda, dear," went on the weak, broken voice, "if you knew how he has suffered, you would not hate or curse him as you must do now—you could not! If you would let me tell you of our sorrow it might make yours seem less great, or at least less difficult to forgive. May I tell it you?"

"Yes."

Almost inaudible was the word, coming from between the fingers pressed so convulsively over the poor woe-begone face; but Arden's mother heard, and thanked her very humbly, promising not to delay her long, but to tell it all in a few words. This promise she did not keep, however, being too used to her own rambling thoughts to be able to condense them into set words and sentences. It seemed almost a relief to her to speak at last of that which had weighed upon her heart—a burden so intolerable—a hideous secret, haunting her by day and night—a thing of terror and of shame. But it was not of that she first spoke. With yearning fondness she went back

to Arden's childhood—when he was such a pretty little boy and wore the Highland kilt, and had such beautiful long curls, so that every one stopped him in the streets; and his papa was so fond of him—as he was, indeed, of both the children—for Arden had not always been alone. He had a sister—a little twin sister—who had been papa's favourite, just because she was a girl, and she reminded him of a little sister he had once had—not that he ever spoke much of her or of any of his family, for they were proud and had cast him off—more shame to them! for a better, truer heart never beat, though, to be sure, he was rather wild at times, and drank deep when the dark fit was on him; but that was not often, and he was always good to her and the children—always. She had never had an unkind word from him all the years they had lived together—not that they were so many after all, for he had died quite young, and then, when she and the twins were left quite alone in the world, and she so lost without her Jamie, Arden had taken his father's place, and been her stay and comfort—so gentle, so brave, so good—such a help to her, such a brother to the little twin sister, who was giddy and foolish; and would be led by no one but him.

It was touching to hear how the mother lingered over those early years of innocence and happiness—over the boy's love for the poor little sister whose fate had driven him mad. "Yes, dear Miss Rhoda, it was that that did it. When he found her on the public pathway, a

crowd collected round her, and the awful broken-hearted look upon her face, it drove him mad, and no wonder ! Dragged out of the river, they said, where she had thrown herself because she had been betrayed and deserted and could not bear to live any longer—was it a wonder that the boy went mad ? He must have gone mad or died.” She had been very near losing him, too. He had been dangerously ill, and when all hope was over—when he lay like one dead, and she took him in her arms and cried out against God for taking from her her all, and leaving her alone in her weakness and her despair, the eyes opened that she had believed closed for ever in death, opened upon her wide and bright ; and he told her that he would not die, that he would live for her sake, that she might not curse God, or doubt the mercy that gave him back to her ; and he had lived to be—mad ! The ardent nature thus blasted, turned to fanaticism—and fame. Yes, the poor mother, who had centred such brilliant hopes on her noble gifted boy, saw them more than realized. Arden was famous, and she who should have been so proud of him and his fame, owned, in the remorseful bitterness of her soul, that it would have been better—oh, how much better !—if he had died in her arms then, when God wished to take him, and her cry of despair had called him back to life. She saw him courted, run after, worshipped as a god ; she could not hide him away out of sight of the cruel world, her poor mad boy, and life became for her a living horror.

Never sure of him, she could not bear him out of her sight, yet when with him his wild looks nearly broke her heart. She trembled and shuddered at the mention of his name—the young husband's name, given so fondly to their firstborn ! When the world applauded she wept, for she knew that the ardent soul was consuming the frail body. She saw him grow paler and thinner day by day, and she could not reason with him, because he was mad. She could only follow him in patient watchfulness from place to place, for he was far too restless ever to be stationary for long.

All this and more Mrs. Graemes told Arden's wife, and then she stretched towards her her clasped hands and cried out in agony, "Oh, don't curse him, dear, don't ! think of all he has suffered, have pity on him ; don't add another curse to that which has fallen upon his life !"

There was no answer, no softening of the dark face. Mrs. Graemes for very nervousness began talking again. But suddenly Rhoda looking up, silenced her by a quick gesture of the hand, and bent her head in a listening attitude. "Hark !" It was the bells ringing in Christmas-day. What a joyous peal ! how merrily it burst upon the ear—the ear of those two women. "Christmas-day," murmured Rhoda, softly, and she turned her heavy eyes towards the window through which the early sun was shining as brightly as if there were no such things as sorrow and sin and madness—and there is so much of all three, so much !

Christmas-day ! the best day in the whole year, bringing peace on earth, goodwill towards men ; merrily the bells pealed forth from every church throughout England, and the winter sun shone alike on the evil and the good, the hearts that were gay and the hearts that were broken—one sun, one God, over all !

Mrs. Graemes, noticing for the first time as the girl's face was lifted to the sunlight how wan and white it was, went softly out and soon afterwards returned with a cup of tea and some cold meat. Rhoda had eaten nothing for twenty-eight hours. "Take it, dear, you will feel all the better for it."

Rhoda took it from the widow's hand without a word, then looked up into her face, answering the faint smile by one fainter still.

"May I send the telegram?"

"No. He sent one yesterday."

"If you would go home—now—before he comes."

"No, no, not now, I couldn't ; I'm so tired," and she raised her hands wearily to her eyes, pressing them a moment over the aching balls.

Mrs. Graemes, seeing how utterly worn out she was, persuaded her to lie down, promising that no one should disturb her. With a great heart-weary sigh she threw herself on the bed.

Mrs. Graemes hesitated before leaving her.

"You won't lock the door upon me this time, will you? No one shall come in but me—one, I promise you."

She bent low over the pillow to catch the answer ; half an hour afterwards Rhoda had fallen into a deep sleep.

And the sun rose higher and higher in the heavens, and the bells rang to church, and happy family groups gathered round festive boards, and still Rhoda slept. And the hours glided on, and the sun set, and there were gatherings round the high-piled grate, and laughter and song and merriment, but Rhoda slept on, and so passed her Christmas-day ! And the night came creeping onward, darkened and deepened, and the dawn rose, the dawn of another day, and still Rhoda slept.

Again and again had Mrs. Graemes come stealing in and up to the bed, wondering at that heavy pulseless sleep, half frightened by its depth and duration.

It was not until late in the morning that Rhoda awoke. Happy are they who have not experienced that first miserable awakening to consciousness after a great shock—the dim sense of something wrong, the weight, the oppression, the struggle of the mind to remember, of the heart to forget ; then the sudden rush of agony, the wringing hands, the despairing cry, the face crushed back upon the pillow, the wild longing for the coffin, the grave, the dreamless sleep from which there is no awakening !

Rhoda's eyes opened upon the daylight wide and bright. The long unbroken sleep had done her a world of good. She was young and strong, and a healthy vigorous frame can hold out

against much. She looked quite fresh, and as pretty as ever, with her flushed cheeks, tumbled hair, and dark brilliant eyes. Poor child! If the tragic scenes of the past day had but been the dream, and this glad awakening the reality—an awakening in the little white bed at home, with her own mother, instead of *his*, bending over her!

Her first clear consciousness was one of hunger. She raised herself on her elbow, and seeing a plate of sandwiches and a glass of wine on the table beside the bed, she seized them eagerly, drank down the one and devoured the other; then turning fretfully from the widow's questioning eyes, she drew the counterpane over her face and closed her eyes once more, trying to close them to the truth which was forcing itself back upon her with such awful distinctness.

"Wont you rouse yourself? Do try, there's a dear," said Mrs. Graemes, who felt nervously anxious to get her out of the house and safe home with her parents, before Arden's return.

But Rhoda said, "No, no!" and the wine drunk down so eagerly having got into her head, she soon fell asleep once more, and might have slept on heaven knows how long, had not a violent ring at the street-door bell awoke her with a start and a cry. Bewildered and only half awake, one thought alone possessed her, and with heart and brain on fire she sprang from the bed and flew downstairs. No one should answer that bell but herself. Mrs.

Graemes had written, and father had come to fetch her home ; oh, joy, joy !

It was strange that at that moment she did not think of her husband, who was also to come and fetch her ; but she did not. When she opened the door father would be standing there, she was so sure, so sure ! Already she saw the stiff, spare figure, the silver hair, the outstretched arms. How she would cling to him—to his breast—his feet. She saw Arden's mother hurrying across the passage, but she would be first still—she would ! Eager, breathless, she reached the door and tore it open. It was too dark for her to distinguish aught but the outline of a man's figure—"Oh ! father—father ! I knew you would come to fetch me home, I knew you would !"

The cry, wild and piercing in its mingled joy and agony, rang out upon the stillness of the evening, and was answered by the one word—

"Rhoda !"

It was her husband's voice ; it was her husband who, staggering towards her, sank at her feet, dyeing the white doorstep and the dress he had involuntarily clutched in falling, with his blood. He had broken a blood vessel. As his mother lifted him into her arms he came to himself ; but it was on Rhoda the first solemn look of returning consciousness was turned. It was to her gown, and then to her shoulder he clung, as he raised himself slowly and with difficulty from the earth.

But as he touched her she shrank back, turn-

ing from him in sickening fear and aversion. If she could have flung off the clutching fingers she would. She did not put out her hand to help him, and when, supported by his mother, he entered the house, she did not even offer the assistance of her strong young arm, though it was so greatly needed.

Arden, wild, travel-stained, haggard, with the blood still oozing from the poor pale lips, was soon lying in the bed from which his young wife had but lately risen. His mother hung over him in speechless agony—mad, guilty, her sorrow and her shame, he was none the less her all—and she loved him as we can but love the one. Though his face was drawn and corpse-like, the great eyes, bright and eager, wandered restlessly round the room—"Where is she, mother?"

It could hardly be said that he had spoken. How could anything like a connected sentence come from those livid, parted lips?

"Oh, hush, dear—hush."

"Where is she? Rhoda—my wife——"

"Oh, Ardy, you mustn't call her so, you mustn't—you daren't——"

"I must see her."

The eyes were growing wilder—a grey shadow was stealing over his face.

"Yes, yes, dear," cried the poor mother; for she believed that her boy was dying under her eyes.

"Bring her to me."

The shadow was falling deeper, greyer. The widow left the room, wringing her hands.

In the parlour she found Rhoda writing. "It's the telegram," she said quietly, looking up, "to tell him I'm coming home."

She had folded up the paper and was rising.

"Oh, Miss Rhoda, he's so bad! dying, I do believe."

Was it sympathy she expected?—sympathy from the woman who had been so wronged?

"If I could but go for the doctor. But there's no one to stay with him whilst I'm away."

Rhoda was putting on her bonnet, the pretty coquettish bonnet that had lain on the parlour table ever since the day when Arden's mother had removed it from her bright hair with such gentle trembling fingers.

"If you *would* go to him, just whilst I am away; and I'd make haste back, indeed I would! He wont frighten you, for he's so weak, so weak. He'll never see another day, and he wont so much as look at me, but calls for you—his wife."

"I am not his wife; you told me so. You said it was a cruel wrong that he had done me, and that I must go away, and never see him again. He is mad and cruel. I will never see him again."

The words were hard and pitiless; the girl's looks were harder, more pitiless still. She was at the door; she was going. Arden's mother threw herself before her, catching at her arm. She did not think how easily that strong young arm could have flung her off, sweeping her from

her path. She thought only of her son's danger—his guilt was as nothing to that !

" He's dying ; a few more hours and he'll be out of your way, anyhow. You loved him, or you would not——"

" He never loved me. It was for love of you he married me. You said so."

From the next room, the door of which stood ajar, came the sick man's ceaseless cry for Rhoda—so doubly piteous in its gasping weakness.

The girl's face did not soften, but it grew troubled.

" Oh, Miss Rhoda, have pity, have pity !"

The mother once more on her knees—the faint pitiful voice with its dreary ceaseless moan—Rhoda, Rhoda.

" I will go."

" She pushed open the door and entered, waving the mother back. " Go for the doctor." Then she went up to the bed. The great blue eyes, no longer wild, but so sad, so solemn, watching her approach. One poor thin hand was held out, softly taken, and held.

" Rhoda—my wife !"

" My husband !"

The words were said unfalteringly. It was as if in that moment of struggle the great lesson of life had been learnt—the lesson of self-sacrifice. Who says that years of purgatorial flames are needed for the purifying of the soul ? Will not one hour of supreme agony often do the work as well ?

Duty was a word Rhoda had never been taught to realize. Through all those years of unshadowed happiness love had been the watch-word, as it had been the ruling principle of her home life. The lesson of duty ! How hard and cold it would have sounded to her eager ear ; yet she now learnt it meekly of her own heart by that sick bed. The dying man was her husband, she was his wife in the sight of God if not of man. She had sworn to be true to him, for better, for worse, in sickness and death till death should them part. Death, it was parting them already, and then her duty would be over. A few more hours of life for him, of duty for her, a few hours out of a lifetime !

“ I am so faint, Rhoda—so tired.”

She laid him gently back on the pillows. But they were too low—he raised himself once more, gasping for breath. Where could he find rest ? The pain-weighed eyes were closing—a stupor as of death gathering slowly over his senses. His head dropped heavily forward, then, still seeking rest, turned, and unconsciously as it were, sank backward till it rested on the woman’s shoulder, the full soft shoulder of which, in her girlish vanity she had been so proud, and which had gleamed white and statuesque, rising from above the ribbons and flowers of the ball dress—when she had been so happy—and her rivals so envious, and Frank, the lost love, so fond.

Had the poor weary head found rest at last ? Once, not many days before, she too had drooped her head, scarce less weary than his, towards his

shoulder, in her wifely love, and longing for sympathy—and there had been no response. But this was duty, not love—duty that seemed less hard, because it was to end with the night. His mother had said he would not see another day, and she must know.

The soft woman shoulder was a pleasant resting-place for the weary head, but the woman's breast was softer, more pleasant still—the breast, which though pure and altogether womanly, had never beat with any higher nobler feeling—had never known love, at least in its sublimer character—devotion, self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness—had never, in short, known any of the diviner passions that make of woman, spite of her weakness and inferiority, something to be revered and adored.

Rhoda drew the pale head down from her shoulder to her breast, supporting the shrinking, fever-stricken form with the close embrace of her strong right arm. So the mother found them on her return.

“Hush—he is asleep.”

The wife and the mother smiled at each other, then their looks met in tender pity upon the still, solemn face, pillowed for the first time since childhood upon a woman's breast.

CHAPTER II.



THE autumn had come and gone, winter had now fairly set in, and Jane was very busy with her Christmas preparations—Christmas, that should be a season of rejoicing for the poor as well as the rich, for those who have nothing as for those who have all. So Jane thought, at least, and made her preparations accordingly. It was really dreadful how much had still to be done; clothing of all kinds to be bought and made up; beef to be salted; puddings and cakes made; a tree to be arranged for the school-children, and a hundred other things besides. It was when Jane was so busy that she hardly knew which way to turn, that she heard Derwent was once more at Roslynn, come to spend his Christmas there. It was from Mildred she heard it. Returning from one of her solitary rambles, she told her that she had met Mr. Reeves, and he had accompanied her home.

Jane looked anxiously into the little face that had never had any secrets from her, but she could detect no signs of emotion; the child looked a little pale, it is true, but she said she had walked far and was tired, which was the

case, no doubt, for she was quieter than usual for the rest of the evening.

The next day Derwent lounged in, and Mildred's face was again scanned by the watchful sister eyes, but they detected nothing new, and Jane's mind was set at rest. She believed that the unpleasant circumstance connected with their last meeting was forgotten; it had never been referred to between them, and she was not one to rake up old grievances. If Mr. Reeves was not to be trusted Mildred was; she would not again subject herself to the young man's impertinence, and after all Jane could not think there was any great harm in him; his ways were a little foreign, perhaps, but his aunt set him up as a model of all the virtues, and who should know him better than she! Not for worlds would Jane have had the child care for him; indeed, the idea of her caring for any one but herself and papa had not as yet occurred to her. Of all unsociable beings Mildred was the most so, and her lonely ways made her all their own. But there was no denying that Mr. Reeves was something altogether superior to the general run of young men, at least at Beddington, and if Jane sometimes felt inclined to give him a good shaking, it was only to rouse him up a bit, and shake into him something of life and vitality.

It was thus Jane viewed things; and Mrs. Reeves, how did she view them? Well, she was as fond of her little favourite as ever, and as demonstrative in her affection as she well could be. Moreover, being about as clear-

sighted as most people, she saw that her pattern nephew was fairly caught at last. She saw that when with Mildred Graves he actually made an effort to be something beyond a mere automaton, and the effort once made, he sometimes grew quite eager and animated. On the other hand, she saw that in his presence Mildred would grow quiet and demure, drooping her long lashes, folding her small hands, answering in low, soft monosyllables, and all this she attributed to anything but indifference. The young people thrown together, what so natural as that they should fall in love? Derwent—the cold, calm, pattern Derwent in love! and with a child of seventeen too! a baby thing like Mildred Graves—it was a delicious idea! But she wisely refrained from betraying anything like a suspicion—things should take their course, for she had resolved upon being magnanimous. Derwent might look higher, it was true. With his talents and prospects he might marry any one.” Mrs. Reeves said this with much complacency as she smoothed the lace lappets of her headdress, and repeated that she would be magnanimous. Perhaps she found this an easier matter from the girl’s being well born on the mother’s side, with every prospect of having a tidy little fortune (for the Doctor was rich) and possessed, moreover, of a character easy of management, and quite ready to submit to authority. If Derwent could do better, she, his aunt, certainly could not. To have that soft, bright, gentle, little creature always about her, depending on her affection,

deferring to her superior judgment, resigning the management of the house into her hands—to feel that she made the happiness of the young people by her advice and cheques, and added not a little to her own comfort at the same time—Mrs. Reeves raised her handkerchief to her eyes, so much was she touched with the thought of her own magnanimity.

It is hard when you have resolved upon being magnanimous, and the resolution suits your own ends exactly, that you should have to defer putting your good resolutions into effect. It is hard, but Mrs. Reeves was magnanimous in a twofold degree, for she waited on from day to day, fearing to be premature and spoil sport, fearing, too, it must be frankly owned, to broach the subject. The truth was, she stood rather in awe of the model nephew, whose cold polished manners imposed on her not a little. From time to time she would throw out sly hints and venture sly jokes, but neither hint nor joke did he condescend to notice; for, as he one day observed, with an indolent shrug of his shoulders—“As she did not know half she said it would be really too hard upon him were he expected to know more than she herself did.”

And was Derwent then really in love with the Doctor's daughter? He thought her the prettiest, oddest little creature he had ever seen, and did not at all wonder at the fancy his aunt had taken to her. It was unquestionably to see more of her that he had returned to Roslynn, and it was only when she was there that he failed to find

it awfully boring. When she spoke he listened, well pleased, though he did not understand half she said. When she was silent he was quite content to look and admire, and when in a talkative mood there was a certain mild excitement in trying to draw her out and make her look up at him. That she was quite aware of his admiration and highly approved of it he never for a moment doubted—that she came there entirely for his sake was a matter equally beyond dispute. It could not be for the society of his good boring old aunt. That a little country girl, who had never been beyond her parish, should lose her heart to him, Derwent Reeves, who had been so spoilt by ladies of all ages and countries, was no such matter for boasting certainly, nor did he boast of it or of anything else, but he did somehow feel flattered by her preference, for she had such a quaint way of showing it. She never blushed like other girls, but when suddenly addressed she would turn pale, and give him a half-shy, half-wild look that puzzled and sometimes almost startled him. Afterwards, when alone, that look would haunt him with a sense of unreality, not unfrequently accompanied by a vague sense of disquiet, but it had its charm nevertheless, as had every word and look of hers. “First love,” said Derwent Reeves to himself—only to himself, reader, for neither in word or manner was the world ever allowed to detect anything of vanity or conceit—and saying it he stroked his foreign-looking moustache, and caressed his collar and stylish

neckcloth in a way peculiar to some men when suddenly struck with a sense of their own merits.

Was Derwent then really in love with the Doctor's daughter? It was a peculiarity of Mr. Reeves that he never honestly answered a question, even to himself.

Now, it happened that one day Mrs. Reeves received an unexpected visit. A London friend passing through the country had stopped at Beddington to see her and the pretty place of which he had so often heard.

Mildred was also at Roslynn when he arrived, come with a message from Jane about parochial matters; and Mr. Laird, who did not see such a sweet baby face as that every day, made himself very agreeable, thereby disturbing Mr. Reeves's equanimity more than that gentleman would have thought at all possible. After lunch, when strolling through the grounds—an awful infliction Derwent deemed it in that winter weather—Mrs. Reeves, noting the cloud on her nephew's face, good-naturedly proposed Mildred's walking on with him—if Mr. Laird would not object to keep pace with an old woman.

Mr. Laird raised no objection, but Mildred did, speaking with some earnestness too. The path was wide enough for three, she said; they had often walked so before, and she took so little room she would not be in the way—Mrs. Reeves would see that she would not, if only she would let her stay!

Mr. Laird laughed, and took off two years from the age he had mentally given her. Der-

went frowned, then smiled; and grasping his cane more tightly than was at all necessary, he fell to kicking the stones with it right and left, in a easy playful sort of manner. What a pity that they were not living things to feel the force of his blows. What a pity rather that the blows so recklessly directed, now here, now there, should not at all times fall on stony ground. Alas! for those who feel, and feeling, suffer!

The conversation turning on old scenes and old friendships, Mr. Laird suddenly exclaimed—

“Oh, by-the-bye, who do you think I came upon the other day quite unexpectedly, when we had not met for years? An old college chum of ours, Derwent.”

“Say rather an old chum of *yours*, my good fellow,” answered Derwent, languidly. “I disown all terms not to be found in Walker’s Shilling Dictionary. I say the shilling dictionary, for the lower the price the fewer the words, and believe me, the real philosophy of life is only to employ such words as are absolutely necessary for daily use.”

“Well, an old chum of *mine*, then,” corrected Mr. Laird, “and a capital fellow too. Stephen MacCullan.”

“MacCullan!” The exclamation, sharp as a cry, had come from Mildred, who, flushed and eager, was looking up into the stranger’s face.

“Yes, do you know him?”

“No—yes; that is, my mother was a MacCullan, of Lockhern.”

“This Stephen MacCullan is your cousin, dear,”

explained Mrs. Reeves ; " in a remote degree at least—it's all the same family, and he and his mother are now the last representatives of it. I knew Mrs. MacCullan many years ago, a fine woman and something of an *esprit fort*, but ridiculously proud."

" And you know him—Stephen MacCullan ?" Mildred asked of Mr. Laird, the strange, wild eyes still raised to his face.

" We were at college together, and a capital fellow he was." And as Mr. Laird said this he looked down admiringly into the radiant, upturned face that was not at all the same pretty baby face he had looked into an hour before, and he thought what a lucky fellow Stephen was to have such a cousin, even in a remote degree, and what a pity it was he did not know it.

" And what's become of him now ?" asked Mrs. Reeves, who dearly loved a little gossip every now and then. " After the father's death they altogether disappeared, I heard—went into hiding somewhere or other, no doubt, for they hadn't a shilling to feed their pride upon."

" He turned doctor, which must have been a cruel blow to her. There must have been a pretty scene between them ; but he got his own way after all, as he generally did when their wills came into direct collision. He can never have regretted the choice he made, for he's the very picture of health and energy, and such a big broad-shouldered fellow that I hardly knew him again. But he knew me, and we'd the jolliest evening together, talking over old times."

Mildred was listening still, eagerly, breathlessly; a hundred varying expressions now lighting up, now overshadowing her face. Mr. Reeves, whose eyes were never long absent from her, noticed her strange excitement and, for the first time in his life perhaps, felt jealous and decidedly put out; more so than was at all agreeable to his natural *sangfroid*. Was it the big broad-shouldered cousin or his friend who so interested her? He felt neglected and ill-used, and at last setting his teeth hard he approached her with a smile, resolved to draw her attention from cousin and friend to himself. They were passing the hothouses.

"You haven't seen the wonderful new plant aunt had down from London. She said it was unpardonable of me not to have shown it you before."

"Thank you, yes, I should be glad to see it; but not now, another time."

He evidently had not her ear, that was given to the confoundedly talkative barrister on the other side. What a tongue the fellow had—long enough to hang himself with, and the college chum, too.

"You seem wonderfully interested in Mr. Laird's conversation."

"Oh yes, so interested; mamma was a MacCullan, you know, and they are the last of the family. Please let me listen."

She spoke in a tone of submissive pleading, just as if he had a right to forbid her listening; and at that moment he verily believed he had.

"No, you must come with me; the flower is no longer as fresh as it was, and I shan't feel inclined to come here again in a hurry. I hate a garden in winter, and I wish you to see the plant—come."

He spoke authoritatively, and turned to go; she flushed, then paled; but left her aunt's side and followed him. He had not expected so easy a triumph, and he smiled his quiet, self-complacent smile, pleased rather with himself than her: for he was still half inclined to resent her late neglect of him. They were standing before the flower he had brought her there to see. It was a rare exotic—curious, but not beautiful. She fixed on it a cold, abstracted gaze.

"You don't admire it?"

"Admire—oh, yes—and—I'm so glad."

She was still looking at the flower, but she seemed lost in thought, and spoke dreamily, as if to herself.

"You are glad to have seen it, of course; I knew you would be."

Her eyes turned slowly from the plant to his face. "Mayn't I go now? It is so hot here." She looked wistfully at the door, but he blocked up the way. He had intentionally drawn forward the steps, and now sat down upon them. He had no mind to let her off so easily. She would be joining the others and leaving him to walk behind, or anywhere else he might please.

"I find the temperature of the place most agreeable, just suited to the state of my blood at this moment—fever-heat, or something of the

like, and I should be afraid to venture out for fear of getting a chill ; so I can't release you, you see."

She stood before him, her eyes downcast, the corners of her mouth drooping slightly, her small hands softly clasping each other, and wonderfully fair, childlike and demure she looked, as she always did when in that attitude.

He felt half angry with her for being what she was, and making him care for her far more than in his soberer moods he thought at all prudent. He leant his elbow on his knee, and bent his head forward upon his hand, that he might get a better view of her face.

"Do you know that you have led me into a sin of which I was never before guilty in my life? You made me jealous, downright, confoundedly jealous. Such a cruel, wicked thing to endanger a fellow's soul just because he happens to care more for you than it."

A quick, upward glance of the great wild, unchildlike eyes looking right down into his—but the lids drooping over them, she was the shy, innocent girl once more.

"Do you know that I care very much for you?"

"Yes, I know—you told me so once before. I have not forgotten. I knew you would say it again. I knew you would ; I have been waiting."

"Oh, you have, have you !" was Mr. Reeves's mental exclamation, "you sly, calculating little puss. You've been waiting for me to renew my vows, and convert them into a formal offer of

marriage. A naïve admission, at any rate, and I'm not so sure but that it might even come to that, if that long-legged, long-tongued fellow dangled about you much longer."

So much was Derwent Reeves taken up with her just then that he failed to attach any great importance to her words—their meaning he thought clear enough. He was a catch, and naturally enough she wished to catch him. What girl would not? But he was not thinking of anything so serious just now. If she remembered the little garden episode, so did he; more especially the closing scene. Had she perhaps been waiting for a repetition of that, too?

In a moment he had sprung down from the steps, and unclasped her hands one from the other to imprison them both in his; and as their contact, warm and soft, thrilled through him—as her face was raised to his in quick, startled appeal—his lips for the second time dropped lightly upon hers.

Bewildered by the momentary gleam of passion that stirred even his sluggish nature, he did not see how white the little face had grown, how cold and deathlike the lips beneath his kiss, and the hands within his clasp. There was little time for observation, indeed, for Mrs. Reeves at that moment broke in upon them. The kiss she did not see, but her sharp eyes caught at once the critical position of affairs—the young people's close proximity, her nephew's flushed cheek and brow, the girl's drooping head. She could not doubt but that the sudden pang of jealousy she

had detected had brought things to the desired issue. To cover their confusion she rattled on for some time without intermission. "It was so hot—so cold. Had Derwent shown Mildred the flower? Mr. Laird had gone home to dress for dinner. Wouldn't they come? It was getting late."

"I am going home," Mildred said, in a low but steady voice.

"Nonsense, I counted upon you to enliven the dinner-table; Mr. Laird will be in despair."

Mrs. Reeves could venture her little joke now that things had been brought to so satisfactory a conclusion.

"I am sorry, but I must go home."

Mrs. Reeves knew from experience that the pretty soft creature had a will of her own; and she understood the girl's feelings too well, or fancied she did, to insist further on the present occasion.

They watched her leave the garden, walking slowly—her head drooping, her hands dropped listlessly to her side; but no sooner was she out of sight than she suddenly threw her arms up above her head, and with a low sharp cry set off running as she only could run. It was late that evening before she returned home, for she had gone very far, walking on and on until her thoughts were all thought out, then she looked up at the grey winter sky, and whispered softly, "I will go home now—yes, yes, I will go home." And so she did, entering the parlour where Jane was busy with her Christmas preparations and

her own happy thoughts, for she was very happy that winter, happier than she had ever been before, for reasons best known to herself.

Mildred stood awhile at the half-open door, a strange expression on her face. Jane looked up with the fond welcoming smile with which she always greeted her return.

"Im glad you're back, dear; I did not know you would be so late."

"There's a storm in the air, and it carried me along with it—such a wild, delicious feeling. I seem to make part of it as I hurry on." And indeed there was something of the storm element in the kiss she gave sister Jane, and the impetuous flinging of her arms about her neck.

"It must be raining, your cloak's quite wet."

Her cheeks and lashes were wet too, or had been a moment before; but this Jane did not know. "Take off your damp things, child."

Mildred's only answer was to drop to her feet in the full blaze of the Christmas fire, and bury her face in her lap.

"I wish I were you, Jane; I wish I were any one but myself, that I might never feel as I sometimes do—never—never."

She spoke with a certain suppressed passion. Jane tried to lift up the little face to look into it, but it remained obstinately bent. What is it, dear—has anything vexed you—are you not happy?"

"Do you think mamma was happy—quite happy, as you are, and papa?"

Of course she was. "What a strange question—whatever could have put it into your head?"

"I've so many strange things there—you can't think how many," she answered, with a little rueful sigh. "I can't think where they all come from, and I sometimes fancy—— But there's papa!" and springing up, her face all aglow, laughing, dimpling, the picture of unthinking childish happiness, she flew out to meet him.

When, after tea, as they sat together round the fire, the Doctor asked Mildred to play to him, for the first time in her life, perhaps, she refused.

"Not to-night, dear," she pleaded, in the soft whisper that was so irresistible. And she tightened the clasp of her soft arms about his neck.

"Why not to-night, Pussy?"

"I can't tell you. I wish I could."

"Is it a secret, then?"

The Doctor felt quite sure that his little daughter had no secret from him, that nothing half so serious had ever troubled her bright young life, so his tone was playful, and his smile too, as he stroked her head. She did not answer the question, and he repeated it. "Is it a secret, then?"

"Yes, a secret for myself. I think that all feelings are secrets, don't you? It's so difficult to answer the little question: Why? Quite impossible sometimes."

I was wrong in saying that during that long

stormy walk all Mildred's thoughts had been thought out.

That same evening—the guests gone, and the aunt and nephew enjoying a tête-à-tête, Derwent stretched full-length on the sofa, smoking, yawning, and mentally weighing the chances of an early meeting with Mildred—Mrs. Reeves, thinking the time now come for the desired explanation, opened the subject thus: “Derwent, I hope you're not playing with the child.”

Now a suspicion of her model nephew's sportive tendencies had never entered her mind. That he had proposed to the girl, loving her honestly, and wishing to make her his wife, she truly believed; any other young man she might have suspected of a meaningless flirtation, but Derwent—— She spoke thus because she thought it sounded well, oracular, with a touch of severity, bringing out into bolder relief the after magnanimity.

Derwent lifted slightly his heavy lids. “Play with a child! my dear aunt, how could you think me capable of such a thing? You know that I hate children—couldn't play with one to save my life. There was Thompson of the Oaks, capital shooting; wanted to run down there for a few days. Nice little wife too has Thompson, and the child not ugly, as children go. Thought it would please them if I tried to notice it, did try, but found on closer inspection that it had a dirty nose; all children have—horrible!

A long, long shudder ran through the model nephew's sensitive frame. There are memories

we shudder to recall—a dirty action—a child's dirty nose. We are not all alike sensitive, or sensitive at least upon the same points.

“Nonsense, Derwent, you know perfectly well what I mean, that I hope you are not trifling with Mildred Graves's feelings.”

“Feelings—did you really say feelings? And I, who was mentally congratulating Miss Graves upon being exempt from them! such stupid things feelings are, you know, so inconvenient too! And you really believe her guilty of them? What a pity!”

Mrs. Reeves was thoroughly provoked. She had fully expected that the first word from her would bring forth a frank avowal now that things had got thus far, but Derwent seemed born to thwart her expectations. When she next spoke it was half angrily.

“You only talk nonsense to defer the explanation that you know must come, instead of being grateful to me for meeting you half way. You love Mildred, and you told her so to-day—deny it if you can, and if you can't the sooner you make a clean breast of it the better. You know I hate anything underhand.”

Derwent winced. Naturally reserved and secretive, any interference with his private affairs was intolerable to him; all the more so perhaps from the disagreeable consciousness that his dependence upon his aunt gave her a certain claim upon him. This was not the first time he had been made to suffer through his *amour propre*; but he never betrayed anything like wounded

pride, not choosing to put an additional weapon into the enemy's hand, to be turned against him on every possible occasion—for people, alas! for Christian charity! will take undue advantage of every detected weakness. So now, though he winced, he smiled too, an amused and slightly disdainful smile, about the best mask he could put on.

The good aunt, who was beginning to feel far more of irritation than magnanimity, waited impatiently for an answer, but getting none she continued in a tone of lofty patronage, which if it made him wince the more, made the smile put on to hide his feelings all the broader.

"I do not say that with the fortune and position prepared for you by your uncle, you might not look higher than the daughter of a country surgeon, but my first thought is your happiness, as it would, I am sure, have been that of my poor dear husband, had he lived to see this day."

Here ensued a pause. Any reference to the departed, accompanied by the words "poor dear," naturally entails the assistance of a pocket-handkerchief, without which the words would lose much of their original effect. From the corner of his eyes Derwent watched the handkerchief being drawn slowly forth, and knowing from experience that the harangue thus prefaced would be a long one, he changed his position and lighted a fresh cigar. That done he fell to paring his nails slowly and carefully, that the occupation might outlast the harangue. "When fate's

against you there's nothing like resignation and useful occupation," was his mental comment. Even Derwent could reason philosophically at times.

Not at once was the handkerchief dropped from the widow's eyes, and when dropped but partially, on to the lap only, to be quite ready should occasion require its further assistance. The handkerchief and poor dear husband thus comfortably disposed of for the time being, she went on more briskly—

"I'm not going to quarrel with your choice, mind; on the contrary, I'm only too glad that you should have fixed it at last. If there's a thing in the world I hate and despise above every other it's an old bachelor. I look upon him as a public nuisance—an anomaly—a criminal."

Derwent actually dropped the dainty little instrument with which he had been rounding his well-formed, almond-shaped nails, and looked up. Aunt, sentimental or patronizing, was the greatest bore alive; but when she went off at a tangent, and talked nonsense, he sometimes condescended to be amused. He was amused now.

"Why should you object to a man's remaining single if he prefers it?"

"Single indeed! What business has he to remain single when the register of births shows the average of two women to every man—half the world old maids! I'd sooner a man had two wives than none, and that's plain common sense. If there were fewer old bachelors there'd be fewer old maids; if there were fewer old maids

there'd be less gossiping and slander, and the world would be ten times better than it is. And now forsooth, to make matters worse, people rail against the convents and talk of putting them down, as if they couldn't see that anything that keeps the women's tongues a little in order is just the greatest blessing going. If it weren't for religion in every country, and the curates in ours——"

Mrs. Reeves stopped short, for the first time becoming aware that her nephew was laughing at her; and that she had wandered very far from the original subject. "Yes, I hate old bachelors," she added defiantly, "and I'm glad that you don't mean to be one, as I half began to suspect. Mildred Graves is the very woman to suit you and—me too. She's a good little thing, and I've no doubt the Doctor will come down handsomely to secure her so favourable a settlement. So, whenever you bring her to me as your bride-elect, I shall receive her with open arms. You understand, Derwent."

He assured her that he did, and thanked her for the homily and the permission to marry, in a tone that was not altogether ironical nor altogether grateful, but something between the two; then remembering suddenly that he had not even seen the evening papers, "by Jove," and that there would be that speech of G.'s, which was as likely as not to turn out the Ministry—he hurried from the room; and though Mrs. Reeves, who, when thinking the matter over, came to the conclusion that he had made no avowal whatever

of his feelings or intentions, and that she was just as much in the dark as ever, waited up for him till twelve o'clock, in the hope of a second and more satisfactory interview, he did not again make his appearance.

CHAPTER III.



THE Beddington schoolroom was prettily decorated with flags, wreaths, and mottoes, and in the midst stood the great bright wonderful Christmas-tree.

Around it were ranged the school children, staring up at its solemn blaze in silent, awe-struck wonder. They had never seen such a thing before—never even in their dreams—and it gave them a clearer idea of heaven and its ideal glories than hymn, or tract, or picture, or sermon had ever done. Behind, making a second and wider circle, stood the parents and relations, their looks scarcely less rapt than those of the little ones. Indeed, the old people seemed especially delighted, and the face of an octogenarian, supporting himself with both hands on his stick, was the brightest and happiest in the room.

It was Mrs. Reeves who had planned the tree, and the Curate and Jane who, under her direction, had carried out the plan. Mr. Chatterman was present on the festive occasion, but with a very glum face, not at all in harmony with the gay scene around. He highly disapproved of the foreign innovation which had for years past been gaining ground in surrounding parishes, but which had never until now been allowed to

penetrate to Beddington. "A tree, indeed ! such nonsense, such a waste of time and money." But all most willingly gave their time, and their money too, so that objection didn't hold good. "Such an unwarrantable encroachment upon old established customs," he next objected. "Plum-pudding and roast beef sent round to the poor, together with warm clothing to the more deserving, that was all very well ; but a heathenish-looking tree, all glare and glitter, entailing no end of disorder and confusion !" He would have altogether refused his consent had it not been for a delicious *pâté de foie gras* sent him by the instigator of the movement. But his black looks, black as Erebus, when directed towards the unoffending benignly-smiling Curate, showed how much the concession had cost him.

Fortunately for Mr. Eden he was shortsighted, and seldom saw anything at which he did not pointedly direct his glasses, and having in general but little liking for his superior, that superior's face, now black as any thunderstorm, would be the very last at which his glasses would be directed. There were other faces fairer and pleasanter far, there was one face by no means the fairest in the room, but to him it was the pleasantest there, or anywhere else in the wide world. Henceforth, when looking back upon that day, he would say it was the happiest of his life ; ay, however happy the coming days might be, it would still be the happiest, because it was the first. No one noticed, or could have noticed, that there was anything between the Curate and

Jane Graves; they spoke but little together, being heart and soul in the business of the hour, but whenever their eyes met, which was seldom enough, for they were too busy for even the language of glances, they would both smile and blush, he as well as she, rosy red, and the smile would have done any one good to see, it was so bright and innocent and happy.

That same morning, happening to stand together at the foot of the tree, giving the finishing touch to it, he holding down to her a branch that she might fix on it a candle and a pretty glittering ball, something was said, the involuntary exclamation of one heart—no matter which, for were they not henceforth to be as one?—that opened their eyes, and showed them how matters stood clearly enough; that made them blush and tremble, and sank the next few broken words into a whisper.

“I know that we must wait,” Charles Eden said, when the whisper had been heard and answered. “I must get a living before I can ask you to be my wife, formally I mean.”

“And I could not leave papa and Mildred yet, you know.”

“Yes, yes, I know—of course you could not.”

The prospect of having to wait, no matter how long, did not frighten either. He was so glad of her love, so grateful for it, and the hope it gave his life, that he looked no further than the actual blessing. And she, happy in her present life, which had hitherto satisfied her every longing, was now doubly happy in the

thought that when the time came for her to marry, she had found the man into whose keeping she could put herself and future without a fear. Absorbed in her home duties and occupations, she had never thought of love or marriage, but when at last her time arrived, and the real true feeling—strong and unalterable, as she knew it to be—came, she was glad.

There had been no kiss, no thrilling words of passion; they were rather a commonplace couple of lovers, or let us only say sensible, for passion is a dangerous thing to indulge in, when years must pass before it can be satisfied.

It was no actual engagement upon which they had entered; there had been no vows, no promises; neither asked of the other more than was fair and just; they understood each other so well. In the eyes of the world they were still what they had been hitherto—friends; and what the world might not see must not be. There must be no secret meetings, no exactions, no jealousies; the perfect trust that was to last for life must begin at once.

It was Jane who said all this in her brisk, clear, open way, and the Curate respected her feelings, and acquiesced without a murmur.

“And your father—you do not wish me to speak to him on the subject; you prefer my not doing so?”

“Yes; I would not leave him and Mildred yet; you would not wish me to; and whatever of suspense and pain may be involved in our position we must bear it alone, you and I.”

The little taper was adjusted, and the branch swung back into its place ; and both looked up at it with a sign, and down into each other's face with a smile.

It was morning then—it is evening now ; and they stand once more beneath the tree and look upward. Other eyes see but the general blaze and are dazzled ; but their eyes, his and hers, meet upon that one little light which, emblem of their simple love, shines so bright and steadfast, though lost in the surrounding glare, and turning from it to each other, as if moved by some secret magnetism, they blush and smile. In the evening of life, even as at the close of the day, if permitted to stand together beneath the tree which their experience will have taught them to regard as the tree of knowledge of good and evil, will the light of love, so bright in youth, burn clear and steadfast still ; and, turning from it to each other, will they smile ?

“ We've seen finer Christmas-trees than this in our day—eh, Derwent ? ” whispered Mrs. Reeves to her nephew ; “ but none ever gave me half so much pleasure ; it's really a pretty sight ; so nice to see poor people happy.”

“ Confoundedly close.”

Derwent Reeves was in a bad temper, and his looks were scarcely more amiable than those of the Rector. He had not caught sight of Mildred for nearly a week—not once since the tête-à-tête in the hot-house ; and the time having hung more than usually heavy on his hands, he had suffered more than usual from ennui, and con-

sidered himself shamefully and most unfairly dealt by. What but his fancy for her kept him at Roslynn? And if she did not show herself was it not a positive injury she did him?

Day after day he had wandered about with his gun, not where game was most likely to be met with, but where he should be most likely to meet with her. He had even the day before allowed himself to be enticed into the school-room, where preparations were already going on, in the hope of finding her there; and once in he had further allowed himself to be persuaded to remain, and make himself useful in the most absurd and fatiguing manner—clambering up steps, stretching his arms to impossible heights, straining himself upwards, in an attitude as trying as it was ungraceful, to attach some hideous banner or wreath or motto, scratching his hands, those hands so well kept and cared for, with the d——d holly, altogether victimizing himself for the gratification of a parcel of dirty, horrid school children. It was iniquitous, monstrous! And he had to bow and smile and seem pleased, that no one might have a word to say against him, that he might not be accused of pride or affectation or conceit. And it was that cruel, spiteful little thing with the baby face and child's voice, who seemed all softness, who had got him into this! He had come to find her and he had found trouble and prickles: more fool he to have anything to do with such a dangerous thing as love, which is nothing but trouble and prickles from beginning to end.

Mr. Reeves, because he had to smile and look pleased in the schoolroom, so that no one might have anything to say about or against him, frowned all the more, and looked all the more glum when alone in the privacy of his room.

"Well, I shall see her there to-morrow at any rate; that's a comfort." It was his only one.

Yes, he saw her there on the morrow, looking so wondrously pretty and fair in the new merino dress of a rich deep violet, that set off to advantage the dazzling whiteness of her skin, and the bright glory of her hair. But, as if to try his temper and patience to the utmost, she made it impossible for him to approach her; keeping close to sister Jane's side, following her wherever she moved, near and faithful as her shadow, and, when stationary, looking up at the great bright tree with rapturous admiration. Not a glance did she vouchsafe to her disconsolate lover—not one. Twice he addressed her, but either she did not or would not hear. Her cheeks flushed to crimson, her lips parted, her eyes raised, her hands tight clasped before her, not the youngest child had a face more innocent and bright than that of Mildred Graves. He was furious.

At last, the tree having been duly stared at and admired, and the presents distributed, the children were marshalled out, followed by the elders. The patrons and patronesses alone remained. Mrs. Reeves proposed to some of them to return with her to Roslynn, and there spend the evening.

"Oh, do—please do," cried Derwent, with most unusual warmth and animation.

Several of the young ladies blushed. Mildred did not.

"*You* will come, you must come," he pleaded, in an earnest undertone.

She did not look at him but at sister Jane; her child brows knit, awaiting her answer.

Jane refused, for herself at least. There were still so many preparations to be made for the following day.

"Mildred, then," suggested Mrs. Reeves; "she, at least, doesn't help in the preparations."

Jane saw the knit brows, the compressed lips; she heard the quick, hard breathing. "Papa must be home by this time, he would not like Mildred to be missing on Christmas Eve."

Derwent bit his lip with vexation; he was too much of a spoilt child—the spoilt child of fortune—to bear contradiction of any kind. What did the old fellow want with his pretty little daughter, when he, Derwent Reeves, wanted her? He'd his medical papers, pills, and plasters; whereas *he* had nothing, not even a French novel. As they passed from the hot, close schoolroom out into the cold, clear, starry night he contrived to get beside Mildred. She must have been aware of his approach, though she was looking in the opposite direction, for she edged up closer to Jane, and slipped her hand, her little, cold, trembling hand, into hers. The action was a perfectly natural one, it was a habit

the sisters had to walk hand in hand in true country fashion, but it annoyed Derwent not a little.

"You are very cruel," he whispered, and for once he was grateful to his aunt's loud talking and laughing which covered the whisper. "Why do you hang on to your sister's skirts so that I can't get a word with you? Why haven't you been to Roslynn all this week? What do you think I stay there for if not to see you, and you shun me like the plague. It's deucedly cruel of you, that it is, and I won't bear it. I must see you—you must come to Roslynn to-morrow." The suppressed anger of the moment made his tone sharp and authoritative.

"No, no—not to-morrow," she interrupted, hurriedly; "not Christmas Day."

"Then the day after. I must see you then—you understand."

She looked up at him timidly, hoping maybe to read his meaning in his face, but it was dark, and she saw nothing. There was a moment's pause, she drew a quick, hard breath, and laid her disengaged hand on his; it was icy cold, but there was nothing extraordinary in that, for it was ungloved, and the evening a sharp and frosty one. "The day after to-morrow, at four o'clock, in Old Cross Quarry. I shall be there."

Was she laughing at him? Her voice did not sound like it. Had she been any other than Mildred Graves he would have suspected her of wishing to play him a trick. A secret meeting at four o'clock in the dead of winter—

in the loneliest, bleakest spot for miles round ! It sounded strangely ominous ! But he knew her to be full of wild whims and fancies, and liked her none the less for it ; he therefore only answered in a careless tone, " All right, I'll be there too."

There was no time to add another word. The laughing and talking had ceased. The party were separating.

The next day, Christmas Day, rose clear and bright. A day to put the veriest hypochondriac into high spirits, to give him a good appetite, and, more important still, a good digestion for the plum-pudding, mince pies, and turkey stuffing, and whatever else of horror makes up an English Christmas dinner. A day to make the heart overflow with universal peace and goodwill. Let us hope that these truly Christian feelings reigned in almost every home in Beddington ; but nowhere were looks brighter, kisses warmer, or greetings more cordial, than in Woodford House.

There was, of course, the annual exchange of presents, surprises for papa under whose very eyes the girls had worked, without his seeing or suspecting anything ; and as usual Jane's gift was serviceable, Mildred's only ornamental—pretty, tasteful, original, everything but useful. And then to see her look of delight at his genuine exclamation of surprise. " And you didn't expect anything ? It came quite as a surprise—quite—quite ?" and she clapped her hands, and then throwing them round his neck,

added, whisperingly, "I was so afraid you might have guessed; Jane said you hadn't, she was sure of it, but I wasn't, and—I stayed in two whole days to finish it."

"Two whole days. Poor little thing; that was very naughty of you, very naughty, indeed; Jane shouldn't have allowed it."

The Doctor holding his little girl very close to him, looked ruefully at the pretty, foolish work that had caused her so great a sacrifice; and then anxiously into the flushed face nestling against his breast, the face so like the dead mother's that it sometimes gave him a pang to look into it. And yet anything fresher, rosier, more perfectly bright and healthy, could not well be conceived.

"You must not do that again, never again, do you hear?"

"Yes, papa; but it's pretty, isn't it? I painted it all from nature—the green moss and the tiny little white flower. I gathered them now, in winter; only think, papa! I was so happy!"

Happy, of course she was happy; how could anything like pain or sorrow touch her, surrounded as she was by love and care!

If Mildred was happy, so was Jane, with a new kind of happiness that she had all these years done very well without; but which, once having, she would have found it hard, very hard, to do without. Christmas Day had always been for her a pleasant day, but never before had it been to her what it was this year.

She only saw Mr. Eden for a minute or two after morning service. He walked with them down the churchyard, and lingered with them a moment at the gate. Perhaps he half hoped that the Doctor would ask him to drop in in the evening; perhaps Jane half hoped so, too; but the Doctor did nothing of the kind. He shook the young man's hand cordially, wished him a merry Christmas and happy new year, and, tucking a daughter comfortably under either arm, turned smiling from the gate. And Jane and the Curate smiled, too, as they let their hands drop from each other. They knew that many such little trials daily—nay, hourly repeated, would have to be borne, and cheerfully, too, with good heart and courage for the sake of each other, and those whose lives must not be troubled by them.

Hanging on papa's arm, Jane chatted gaily all the way home; it was only when arrayed in a large, white apron to preserve her new merino, she went into the kitchen to superintend the final dinner arrangements, that the snub, good-tempered face lengthened a bit, and grew grave. As she hooked the pudding out of the pot, and nodded, well pleased to see that it was done to a turn, as she arranged the dessert and decanted the wine, she could not help wishing that *some one* were there to enjoy with them the good things; to share with papa and Mildred the tit-bits of every dish. Where was he dining? She had so much wished to ask him, and had only been prevented by the fear of blushing—a

luxury that must not be indulged in; later she would be able to look at and talk to him without betraying herself. Oh dear, yes. But just at *first*! Would he have a dull, lonely dinner at home? and what a dinner it would be, cooked by that frightful old dragoness! Would he feel sad? She was beginning to feel so herself. That would never do. Why not look on the bright, instead of the dark side of things? He would, surely, and so must she for his sake. They were young, and the future, God willing, was theirs; the future with its many Christmases, its many opportunities of proving the love that needed not sentimental sighs and longings to consecrate it. His dinner might be ill-cooked, and he might feel rather dull; but where was the use of mourning over what *might* be? better thank God and be grateful for what was.

Jane thanked God and was grateful; and her face as she entered the dining-room, in its serene good humour and content, was a thing worth seeing.

So the cloud no bigger than a man's hand, the cloud of repining and discontent which, if indulged in might have gathered into a storm, darkening the girl's whole future life, passed harmlessly by. And after all, any sighs she might have expended upon the Curate's probably ill-cooked dinner would have been so much good breath wasted. For the Curate was feasting on all the delicacies of the season at Roslynn, having been invited there together with Mr. Chatterman. Mrs. Reeves had long seen that

no good understanding existed between the two reverend gentlemen. Her colleague had to bear the odium of all her pretty little reforms, besides many an independent one of his own. He was heart and soul in his work, and whatever he saw to do he did it with all his might, but with too little reference, perhaps, to the authority, or we should say prejudices, of his superior. Only the day before, Mr. Chatterman had heard of an adult class to be held once a week after the new year, in the Curate's rooms, and it was this coming event maybe, casting its shadow before, that threw so dark a shadow over the portly gentleman's face that Christmas Day.

The dinner was first-rate, but alas! the peace and goodwill which belong to the holy festival quite as much as turkey and plum-pudding, were wanting.

Derwent seeing how matters stood, partly to tease his aunt, partly to amuse himself, as he was rather fond of doing at the expense of others, professed all at once a violent interest in church and parish matters, and led on the shortsighted, unsuspecting Curate, happily unconscious of the storm that had long been brewing, to talk of his work, his plans for the future, his success in the past; and as, waxing warm with the subject, he entered upon it more fully, smiling complacently behind his spectacles, Derwent watched with no small inward satisfaction the colour gradually suffuse the Rector's face, until it glowed red and lowering as the evening sky behind storm-piled clouds.

That night the lorn widow's lodger, and the inmates of Roslynn and Woodford House laid them down to rest as usual, and little dreamt, ay, waking or sleeping dreamt, of what the morrow was to bring forth. All laid them down to rest, and slept or waked according as their conscience and digestion happened to be good or bad: the Curate and his brave-hearted little sweetheart—the grey-haired Doctor in the room where his wife Mildred had died—the room he had locked up after the funeral, and not entered again for months; not until one day, unable any more to bear the longing that was worse than pain, he had stolen in, her sleeping baby in his arms—her baby who, about the same age as herself when he had first seen her among her flowers, lay on this Christmas night in her pretty, white bed, looking so innocent and happy, so childish too, now that the solemn eyes were closed, and the bright hair fell about her face, half veiling the flushed cheeks and small, dimpled hands tight clasped over her breast, as they always were in sleep, ever since the dead mother's mystic rose had been folded under them, looking so innocent and happy, because she was both! And Derwent Reeves who, not accustomed to such awfully early hours, yet too weary of his own company to stay up any longer, lay tossing to and fro, restless and feverish, the one pleasant thought he had, and it was but half pleasant after all—Mildred. Strange, whimsical child! What was she up to now? What did she mean by fighting shy of him in that way, and then looking as

fresh and rosy and happy as if it were a matter of perfect indifference to her whether she saw him or not. How pretty she had looked at church that morning with the winter sun glinting down upon her bright hair which contrasted so bewitchingly with the black velvet bonnet! Well, she shouldn't escape him another week, not she! rather than suffer that he would——" Derwent did not care to make any serious admissions even to himself. He found it far safer when standing on the edge of a precipice to turn his back upon it; for to look into it gives one sometimes a queer wish to spring down headlong.

And what was the precipice upon whose edge he stood? Alas! how many of my readers stand at this very moment on the extreme verge of the same precipice and look down into it with brow serene, and loudly beating heart, seeing smiling valleys and fairy landscapes where he, Derwent Reeves, saw only a shapeless chaos. Was he right, readers, or are your smiling valleys and fairy landscapes all the phantoms of the imagination? Joy and love and hope are all the phantoms of the imagination too. All that your soul longs after with so great a longing, be it fame or happiness, is but the phantom your imagination conjures up. Is the real only the *unattainable*, then?

The precipice upon whose edge Derwent Reeves stood was matrimony, and he very wisely turned his back upon it, feeling the insane wish growing upon him to plunge in headlong. So instead of concluding the sentence

he had in thought begun, he returned to the less dangerous contemplation of the velvet bonnet and the baby face it shrouded; and being a great admirer of beauty, he found some gratification in recalling the pretty round forehead over which the waving hair tumbled naturally, the eyes bent demurely down upon the big Church Service which looked so much too heavy for the tiny hands that held it. And from hands his volatile fancy passed to lips. What a rosy dimpled little mouth it was to be sure! and what a capital opportunity he should have on the morrow to repeat that last garden scene! He had half feared she was offended; but that could not be, or she would never have proposed a tête-à-tête in that lonely out of the way spot. Lonely and out of the way enough, by George! He remembered to have seen it from the road, not many months before, shining white and ghostlike beneath the moon, when returning home from a late croquet party. It must be shining white and ghostlike now; for the moon was at its full. He raised himself on to his elbow and glanced towards the window. Something seemed to be passing between it and the moon, throwing its shadow across the blind, the shadow as of a human form, trailing robes, and outstretched arms and upturned solemn features.

What made his heart throb and his blood curdle in his veins? Not the midnight shadow surely, that would be too childish! He raised himself to a sitting posture, and passed his hand

over his forehead ; it was covered with a cold sweat, and his whole frame trembled nervously.

Springing down from the bed he gave vent to an exclamation of impatience ; then having found his slippers, and drunk down a glass of cold water, he grew composed and philosophical.

Shadows, indeed ! Who cared for them ! Life was full of them, as full as it could hold. Shadows of the future—shadows of the past. Of the past !—nonsense ; it was no shadow that had caused that d——d cold shudder down his back ; but a substance. Oh, that Christmas dinner ! that slice of plum-pudding ! “ Serve me right,” he moralized, as he returned to bed, and sank down once more among the pillows. “ Serve me right. When a man forgets in one moment the aim and object of his existence, and succumbs to a passing weakness, that man richly merits—a cold shudder down his back ! And what have I to live for but my digestion ? I, who, having a handsome allowance and prospects, have also the indispensable appendix thereto—dyspepsia. For this select malady have I year by year visited the German baths, deriving, I must in justice own, incalculable benefit from them ; for their gaming-tables emptying my pockets of more than half their contents, I must needs make shift to live on the lesser half, and there’s nothing like that for curing dyspepsia. Empty pockets ! By Jove ! full ones are pleasanter. That sandy-haired Curate must have awfully empty ones. What an appetite the fellow has ! two slices of plum-pudding, and a

mince pie into the bargain—horrible ! And I'll be bound they've had no worse effect upon him than to make him snore somewhat louder than usual, whilst I—— Well, well, Christmas and its confoundedly heavy dinner only comes once a year, and who knows whether in twelvemonths' time I may not have something lying even heavier upon me than pie or pudding."

The precipice again, reader, you see ! Always returning to the very verge, and then turning his back upon it.

And so passed the night that to one at least in that quiet country town was to prove the last.

CHAPTER IV.



ON St. Stephen's day, after morning service, Mr. Chatterman and his Curate had an interview, and a very stormy interview it proved. The previous day's good cheer had, alas! had anything but a soothing effect upon the elder gentleman, the heavy wines and dishes having inflamed his blood and temper at the same time, and brought on alarming symptoms, moral as well as physical. It was under these unfavourable circumstances that the Curate sought him out to obtain his sanction of the evening classes, of which, unfortunately, he had already got wind more than a week before.

Anything like a good understanding could never exist between two men so entirely different, and who could so little understand each other. Mr. Chatterman in the appointment of a curate had only thought of him as a helpmate, on to whose shoulders he could shift the greater part of his work, with but a very small part of his pay. And lo! his subordinate had got the upper hand of him, and with his daring spirit of reform had turned the whole parish topsy-turvy. Wherever he went he heard of fresh innovations which both enraged and alarmed him. "Where was it

all to end? In a strike, of course—the end of all such Quixotic folly. Reform and revolution were one and the same. He should have the whole town in revolt, if a stop were not put to his Curate's mad freaks. His presumption, and the undue advantage he took of the authority conceded to him by his superior's over-indulgence and confidence (he did not say, as he should have done, indolence and gout), rendered him altogether unworthy of their continuance."

At this conclusion he had just arrived when the door opened, and Mr. Eden, the very picture of health, moral as well as physical, entered the room, the Christmas spirit of universal peace and goodwill beaming forth from the mild countenance, and from behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. With the most respectful solicitude he inquired after the Rector's foot. The Rector gave a grunt that might have been meant for an answer, but which sounded far more like an imprecation, for a violent twinge at that moment made him wish himself, the Curate, and whole parish at the bottom of the sea.

"Dear me!" ejaculated the Curate, his kindly face lengthening into sympathy; "how very sad—how very dreadful!"

Another grunt, and silence; then, just as Mr. Eden, hoping that the pain had subsided, cleared his throat to enter upon the subject that lay so near his heart, the Rector saved him the trouble by giving him a piece of his mind in no very measured terms.

"I altogether disapprove of your system," he

cried, at the end of a long and violent harangue ;
“ I disapprove of missionary meetings, singing clubs, working clubs, Christmas trees, and, above all, adult classes, and I’ll never give them my sanction—never.”

“ You can’t mean——”

“ I mean that I’ve kept the parish in order for the last twenty years, and I’m not going to have it turned upside down now. Adult classes, indeed ! and Joe Barnes who talks of attending them forsooth, instead of staying quietly at home and helping his wife mind the babies. It’s no minister’s work to take a man away from his home——”

“ No, indeed,” interrupted the Curate, eagerly ;
“ but I don’t see how one hour’s instruction once a week can interfere with a man’s home duties. You have been misinformed. If you would but allow me to explain my views——”

Mr. Eden did verily believe the Rector to be labouring under a mistake which a few words from him would rectify.

“ I want no explanation. I judge of your work by its results. There’s a dangerous spirit of insubordination and revolt abroad in this parish as throughout the whole country, and it’s the duty of every good subject to quell instead of fostering it. It’s enough, I think, that in every parish we have our free schools—and a pretty trouble the rising generation will give the Government in return for its ill-judged concessions—without teaching the fathers and grand-fathers to——”

"Read and write," again interrupted Mr. Eden, sinking his voice as he felt his anger rise. There was poor Barnes could have got into the new factory, and doubled his wages, if only he'd known how to write and cast up accounts—such an honest, hard-working fellow. It's a cruel thing that he can't better himself and his family."

"Better—a man's best off when he knows how to be content with his actual condition. If he had double wages he'd have double work too, so he's better off as he is."

"But his family——"

"Have no right to expect to be better off than their father. I tell you that there's no such thing as being better off. With a higher position come higher pretensions; the labourer of twenty years ago had ten shillings a week, and was content: the labourer of to-day has twenty, and gets up strikes."

There was much of reason in all that the Rector had said. Charles Eden felt this and sighed, then turned the subject slightly without changing it.

"It's difficult to act at all times for the best, but I think that every man should have a chance, I'm sure that it's God's intention in bringing him into the world that he should have it. As to my evening class. . . . it will, I hope, have other advantages besides merely educational ones. I have given the matter much earnest thought, and I feel convinced that it will serve to bring priest and parishioner together as nothing else could;

it sets them on a more friendly footing, a man will open his heart to his teacher when he would not to the preacher. It's so hard to make the men look upon you as a friend, to make them believe that you take a real interest in them and their concerns, and that it's not all cant and humbug when you preach Sunday after Sunday of brotherly love. . . . and—all that kind of thing."

Mr. Eden stammered over the last words and coloured painfully, fearing that unintentionally he had been personal in his censure. Mr. Chatterman preached Sunday after Sunday loudly enough, but the brotherly love, where was it? Fortunately for himself, however, the Rector was not of an over-sensitive nature, and he only repeated doggedly, that he did not see the use of adult classes, taking up the poor man's only free time.

"Which would be spent in the public-house. It was for this, you see," added the Curate, with a shrewd smile, which showed him to be not altogether without a certain meek pride in his clerical wisdom, "that I chose the Saturday evening for the class, deeming it the best preparation for the Sunday, and the surest means of keeping some of the men at least from the public-house, where they drink away the whole week's wages."

"Rather unfair to our good friend the publican, I think," sneered the Rector, "and not quite consistent with your notion that every man should have a chance of bettering himself. What

chance has he if you rob him of his Saturday customers? It's the old story of the spider and the fly over again, only reversed—the fly saved, the poor spider left to grow lean, and go hungry. Now, for my part, I don't see that the fly's any better than the spider, much more troublesome and less ingenious. And I don't see why you should rob poor Privott, an honest church-going man, of his Saturday receipts."

"No man has a right to live at the expense of another. You do not, you cannot mean to encourage a vice which is the source of almost every crime. Would you have every parishioner like that miserable Wilks?"

"Every parish has its black sheep, but I don't see that Wilks is much worse than the rest of them here. He's pretty sober throughout the week. On Saturday he turns into the public-house on his way home, spends there some of the money he made the other six days, gives his wife the beating she has deserved throughout the week, and for which she likes him all the better, and with the money he leaves behind him at the tavern, our friend the publican *better himself and his family.*"

Now, the Rector did not mean anything so very dreadful by his coarse flippant words; he was in a towering rage, that was all; nay, not all, for when suffering from those cruel twinges of gout it seemed to him a matter of but very little importance whether the parishioner got drunk, and the publican got rich, or whether both went to the dogs together.

This state of feeling, however, Mr. Eden, who was afflicted with no worse twinges than a mild one now and then, in rainy weather, about the region of the small toe, could not understand; and his hair actually rose upon his head, so great was his horror and amazement. A clergyman speak thus? The atheist, the scoffer, God help him! might thus mock the Creator and the creature, but a clergyman! Slowly his honest eyes dropped from the face of his superior on to the table before him, and in a low and steady voice he said—

“Our views are so entirely different that I see further discussion would be useless. You will, I hope, think better of my plan, and give it your sanction.”

“I shall give it nothing of the kind,” cried the Rector, now fairly exasperated. “My parish has done very well without that and all other such like nonsense for the last twenty years, and it will do without them for the next twenty, or so long at least as I am in it, and I wonder, sir, that you dare——”

“Do my duty, or at least what I consider to be my duty? Yes, always.”

The delicate nervous hand clenched itself, then descended with silent force upon the table. The benign smile had passed from both eyes and lips, the former clear and steadfast looked his superior full in the face, the latter were close set. His face was very pale, but he did not flinch, and he was glad, very glad, that he had spoken as he had, notwithstanding the awful change that distorted

the Rector's countenance, threatening a fit of apoplexy, or a fit of passion scarcely less alarming.

"As you please; but in that case I must tell you that, as our views upon the subject of duty differ so entirely, and as I choose to be master in my own parish, the sooner you look for another curacy the better."

A slight wave of the hand accompanying the words dismissed the Curate from the Rector's presence, at the same time as from the curacy.

Mr. Eden rose, he was trembling with indignation and wounded feeling, trembling so violently that it was with difficulty he could stand; for though no coward, certainly, the contact of the refined and sensitive with the coarse is agony. At that moment, he felt it a positive relief that the interview had ended thus—to have gone on working under the man who could speak as Mr. Chatterman had just spoken, would, he felt, be impossible. He took up his hat, then laid it down again. A sudden thought made him pause—a thought, not of himself, not of the woman he loved, but of those among whom he had laboured with such encouraging success, who were already so much the better and happier for his ministry. Any other curate might do as well as he—any other earnest conscientious minister might do better. Might, yes! But what would be the Rector's next choice? "The hireling fleeth because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep." Charles Eden's conscience said this to his pride—the shy sensitive pride that was his second nature, and

he was not the man to turn a deaf ear to the voice of conscience. For the sake of the flock an appeal must be made—however repugnant to the feelings of the gentleman, it must be made. There was something of the martyr-spirit in the steadying of the shaking limbs and voice, in the crushing down of the man's pride. He had meant no disrespect, he said—nor did he wish to dispute Mr. Chatterman's superior authority. He regretted if his zeal for the Church had led him into any too great warmth of expression towards the churchman, and as the evening-class was the only thing that had met with his direct disapproval, he would renounce it rather than—

“Give up the curacy,” sneered the Rector.

“The cure of souls,” corrected the Curate, with gentle dignity.

“Hem—three words instead of one for the same thing; I understand.”

If in the Curate there was something of the martyr-spirit, in the Rector there was something of the spirit of the bully. Having always disliked his assistant, he now despised him—despised him for the concession he imputed solely to interested motives. He could carry it with a high hand now. He could, and did. Mr. Eden had to accept his dismissal as final.

As he walked home with quick, uneven steps, every nerve in his body jarring painfully, he met several of his favourite parishioners, and his heart sank lower and lower as he returned their friendly greetings. He had done for them what he could, had he done less he might have re-

mained among them. He might have retained his post, and not had to leave the place where he had learnt to know real happiness by knowing Jane. The Curate's first thought had not been his little love, but he thought of her now, and the thought brought both pain and comfort.

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CHAPTER V.



HERE'S Mildred ?"

"I don't know, papa ; I thought she was with you."

"So she was till half-past three ; then she jumped up saying she should be late. Haven't you seen her since then ?"

"I haven't seen her since dinner."

"She must have gone to Roslynn."

"To Roslynn—oh, dear, no ! She'd never go there without telling me, or saying good-bye."

"Well, I'm riding over to B——, and shall not be back till late."

Jane detected something of disappointment in the Doctor's tone, and hastened to declare that Mildred had surely not gone out—she was in her room of course, she would go and fetch her.

But Mildred was not to be found, nor her hat and cloak either. She had evidently gone out after all, and without saying good-bye, too.

The Doctor mounted his horse, and rode away slowly, turning at almost every step to see if his little girl were really nowhere visible. She might have played him a trick, hidden herself behind some hedge or gate to pop out upon him as he passed. She had done so many and many a time before, even after bidding him good-bye with

a thousand kisses and her arms about his neck, and to-day she had gone off without a last word. The way he had to go was long and lonely, and the afternoon was a very cold one. Perhaps he would have felt both cold and loneliness less had he not had to miss the parting kiss, and the warm clasp of the child's arms about his neck.

As with a last backward look he turned from the lane into the high road, he caught sight of something not unlike the flashing of her bright hair behind the hedge in a neighbouring field. Had she indeed come so far to surprise him? No, it was not she, but a stranger, bare-headed, red-haired; a pale, boyish-looking creature, but with eyes wild and intense, who stood leaning over the gate looking out into the road.

Something in the face, in its expression, made the Doctor start, and look at him attentively. It was as though he had seen him before—where? when?

The great wild eyes, with their intent, burning gaze, followed him until he had passed out of sight, then the stranger opened the gate, crossed the road, turned down the lane along which the Doctor had but just now come, and cut across the fields in an opposite direction. He had evidently some object in view, for he walked steadily onwards, never turning to the right hand or to the left, never pausing, never raising his eyes from the ground. On and on, from the road into the fields, from the fields out again into a by-road, gleaming white and spectral, with its scant row of tall and leafless trees on

either side—the road along which Mildred had fled some months before—the road leading to Old Cross Quarry.

He reached it and stood on the edge of the rocky hollow looking down into it.

The day had been rather boisterous, but at that moment a deep stillness reigned around, more especially on that spot, sheltered as it was by the grove of trees. A deep stillness, only broken now and then by faint, uncertain sounds, stirring the frost-bound earth—sounds as it would seem of advancing footsteps, not the heavy eager tread of men, but footsteps soft and stealing, such as we hear in dreams, and amid the deep, solemn stillness of such a winter evening.

“I know—I know!” he muttered, as the sounds came stealing towards him where he stood. “I hear your footfall nearer and nearer, soft but sure, the grave is dug, and the winding-sheet spread (stretching up his arms towards the gathering snow-clouds), but it must not fall until—until——”

Letting his arms drop slowly to his side he turned from the quarry to the little wood that bordered it, and there on the mossy root of one of the trees he saw a young girl sitting, her head thrown back and resting on its trunk, her right hand dropped to her side, fast asleep—asleep in that desolate spot, on such a day, at such an hour!

Was it the thought of her danger—of the storm-clouds gathering overhead, and the storm-

wind wrapping her around—that made the wanderer start back with that low sharp cry of terror.

“You?” he whispered, bending towards her and putting out his trembling hand as if to touch her. “*You!*” And as he repeated the word the stern, haggard features softened and quivered, and the wild light in the great eyes died slowly out of them; then, as if but to get a nearer look into her face, he bent down towards her, lower and lower, until he was kneeling at her side. The girl did not awake, but she turned slightly towards him as if in some way aware of his presence, and at the same time her lips parted into a smile. The wan face, bent down over hers so close that his hot breath stirred her hair, seemed to catch the reflection of the smile, and something of the old boyish radiance came back to it once more. Very gently he touched a lock of the bright hair waving a little apart from the rest, and the small hand that lay along the ground; then he rose and moved away.

“Visions,” he said, pressing both hands wearily over his forehead—“visions, all of them, this one like the rest, coming and going, nothing real—nothing, nothing, but *that*. So young, so weak, closed eyes, and smiling lips and small hand dropped helpless to the ground—helpless, when the hour of vengeance comes?”

That same afternoon at about half-past four, for punctuality was not one of his cardinal virtues, Derwent Reeves strolled through the Roslynn grounds, and thence out into the road leading

to the quarry. He would ten times rather have remained by the library fire, getting what amusement he could out of his pipe, the papers, or his own thoughts. He hated wind, and he hated walking, and he felt quite angry with Mildred Graves for having subjected him to two such very disagreeable things. But it was the last time he would submit to her caprices. The very idea of her choosing that cold damp draughty place when they could have had such a pleasant little tête-à-tête on the hearthrug—for aunt was always accommodating. And just to-day, of all days, when he was feeling anything but well—cold shivers running about him, feverish pulse, too—it was really most inconsiderate! But women were always selfish—always. And what did she want of him? To bring him to the scratch, of course; fearing perhaps, like aunt Reeves, that he was playing with her feelings. Too bad, by George! a regular league against him—must be on his guard. Who could tell how it would all end? As likely as not in his being caught when he was such a soft——

[Derwent Reeves said this because he was in the habit of lying even to himself; he said it knowing all the time that he could be hard, God knows how hard, when occasion required.]

And as matters stood, would it not be as well to go in for it at once; for unless he meant to break with her altogether, it would come to that in the end, of course. A girl without fortune, family, and protection might be disposed of in quite another way, but Mildred Graves had all

three, so marry her he must, or leave the place and her. And after all, if there was one thing in life that could give him more pleasure than another it would be an engagement with her. Sure of her, it would no longer be necessary to put himself out of the way for her; she would come to him, instead of his having to go after her as he was always doing now. She would talk to him, sing to him, play to him, allow him to kiss her whenever he should feel inclined, which would be pretty often, at first. She would embroider him slippers, and caps, and purses, mend his gloves—in short, be solely occupied with him. And really, after all, she would not interfere so very much with his bachelor habits, or his digestion, either; nor would she try his nerves as many another woman might. She was no great talker—thank God for that! and she was quite incapable of hysterics. She had no sporting tendencies—thank God for that, too! (this was said most fervently, and with a slight shudder, for the very thought of a masculine woman always sent a shudder of horror through him). The courtship would amuse without unduly exciting him. The courtship, ay, but that could not last for ever; sooner or later it must end in marriage, and how would it fare with him then?

How did it fare with all the married men he knew? Alas, alas! the sad experience of our first parents everywhere reproduced; Paradise first, then expulsion—the flaming sword—and babies. Eve no longer the consort, but the mamma. And it would be of no use kicking

against the pricks—not a bit! that was all a bachelor's fond delusion. If he had babies he must submit to his little love being mamma, and himself papa, and nothing more. He was no ogre nor Jean Jacques Rousseau; he couldn't wring the neck of each new comer, nor pack them off to bore other people instead of him. Ay, that Rousseau was a real philosopher and no mistake, he mentally ejaculated. After all the true philosophy of life consists in not allowing yourself to be bored. Great heavens! how full is the earth of bores! And if there be another state after this, it will be fuller of them still; for there'll be ever so many generations of them instead of one. Hitherto he had not found Mildred a bore; on the contrary, but would she end by boring him as other people did? Women were not to be trusted—should he risk it?—dared he? What, if after actually marrying her, making for her sacrifices that he could not even now contemplate as possible, she should bore him! It would be cruel—inhuman—monstrous; but it was possible!

Mr. Reeves had now reached the by-road leading to the quarry, which gleamed before him white and spectral in the fading daylight—its tall trees scant and leafless, bending and whispering to the north wind that was blowing through them; and beyond them the hollow—deep and yawning as some monster grave. He looked towards it—even as he had but now looked onwards towards the future that there awaited him, dim and shadowy in the solemn twilight of thought—then back along the road

he had come; and as he did so his thoughts went back involuntarily along the wake of the past—that past long since forgotten, buried, hidden away out of sight. What had brought it up at such a moment—remorse? He was incapable of it. He had not invoked it; it had come unbidden, vivid, real, as when it had been reality itself. The future and the past meeting where the two roads met—the waiting love here, the betrayed love there. The way along which he had come, and which in the eyes of the world was so smooth and straight, leading by a natural continuation of it to the road beyond—the waiting love and the yawning chasm that looked so like a grave. The north wind was sweeping cold and drear over the place, but Derwent, lifting his hat from his brow and passing his hand over it, found it covered with a heavy sweat. The fever of the past night seemed to be on him once again. Was he ill—really, seriously ill? It was all the d——d unhealthy climate, nothing but damp and fog. Roslynn in the month of January! More fool he for risking his health for the sake of a pretty face; but where was the girl? Not there, perhaps, after all. He half hoped she was not; he felt shaken and unnerved, and in no way disposed just then to play the lover. He even resented upon her the strange fit of nervousness that was upon him. She had unduly excited him during the past week; he was unused to being thus led away by his feelings, and it didn't agree with him. He must be more prudent in future

—but what was that? He started and stopped short, every nerve in his frame quivering. Were they not advancing footsteps, creeping and cautious, he heard behind him? He had now entered the wood, and looked around; nothing was to be seen; but then it was growing dark, and surrounding objects had become dim and uncertain. Such a spot, such an hour for a rendezvous! The creaking of the branches close beside him, the sound as of a deep labouring breath near at hand made him start once more, shivering convulsively. Was he a coward? —was Derwent Reeves a coward, physical as well as moral? Ay, a coward, indeed! What had his whole life been but a display of cowardice. A coward at his nurse's knee, good and submissive, not from love but fear. A coward at school and college; keeping himself out of scrapes because he dared not get into them. A slave to public opinion because he dared not brave it; a slave to the whims of a crotchety old uncle, not because he was grateful, but because he was a coward, bartering his manly independence of thought and action for the favour he dared not risk. A coward in love; ruining the woman who had trusted him, and deserting her when passion had turned to fear, because she was helpless and alone. Well might the cold sweat of the coward bedew the brow that had never reddened with honest shame; for shame, together with every other human feeling, was disowned by the man who dared not show himself to the world as he was.

Can he who is incapable of shame be capable of love? Derwent Reeves was incapable of it, incapable even of appreciating it. His old nurse had loved him, and though he fawned upon her he hated her because he feared her blows. His uncle had loved him too, and been good and generous, and he had despised the old man for his very affection. His aunt had been to him like a mother, and she bored him to death. A woman—God help her! it would be more correct to say a child—had once loved him as a man is never loved but once, and through that love he had killed her; and not many days before he had dared to press his coward lips to those of sweet Mildred Graves, and repeat the coward lie, vowing the love of which he was incapable.

A moment's hesitation, and with a throbbing heart and shaking limbs he passed from the grove of trees into the opening beyond. Nothing to be seen there but the gauntly waving branches overhead, and below the white yawning chasm that looked so like a grave.

CHAPTER VI.



VERY brightly burnt the fire in the parlour of Woodford House, and very cosy the parlour looked; more especially that corner of it where Jane sat at work, her face as cheerful and serene as if there were no such things in the world as secret love and adverse fate. Adverse fate, indeed! She would have been quite angry with you had you even hinted that hers was or ever could be such; and had you asked her to name a happier creature than Jane Graves she would have told you, with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, that there was none happier, that she had ever known or wished to know. Anxious to make the most of the solitary hours, she darned and hummed, and hummed and darned, only now and then interrupting both occupations to look up at the clock on the mantelpiece, and give the fire an encouraging poke. It was really wonderful how much work she got through when alone; working and thinking got on so well together, the one seeming to help the other.

The first basket of work disposed of, she rose to exchange it for a fresh one, and passing the window on her way back to her seat she stopped at it, drew back the curtain, and looked out.

"Snowing, I declare ; and so fast, too ! Who would have thought it, when the morning was so mild ? I wish she were back. Where can she have gone—and without a word ! To Roslynn, I fear, after all. I wish she wouldn't go there any more till he's gone. She doesn't care for him, I'm sure, and he only teases her. I don't think she'll ever care for any one but papa and me, and I hope she wont, unless she could get some one just like—no, not just like"—as she remembered the spectacles and scant sandy hair—"but some one just as good as——" The name was not uttered, even in thought—that was quite unnecessary ; it was substituted by a smile and nod of the head that said plainly enough, "Yes, yes, he's all that is good ; better than he no one could ever be. What great flakes, and how dark it has grown ! I wish she were here."

Jane was not uneasy ; she was too well used to Mildred's strange erratic ways and wild wanderings in every weather, at every hour. She could not even indulge in a sisterly fear of her catching cold ; she had never had such a thing in her life, had never suffered from even an hour's indisposition, since the process of teething, which she had got through as no other baby ever had. Physical as well as moral pain had been spared her ; she was the spoilt child of nature, as well as of papa and sister Jane.

No, Jane was not uneasy, but the prospect from without was a dreary one, that within as bright and pleasant as light and warmth could

make it, and she wished that Mildred were there to share its comfort. What pleasure could she possibly find abroad on such a night?

The prospect was certainly a dreary one, so she dropped the curtain and returned to her seat and work. A sudden gust of wind sweeping boisterously round the house, then dying away as suddenly as it had arisen, with a faint far-off shriek, made her start. A snowstorm coming on, and father and sister both out in it! Not even to herself would she own that she felt nervous, but her hand trembled as she tried in vain to re-thread the needle. "They'll be here directly—yes, yes, of course, both of them—so I may as well be looking after the tea." It was thus that Jane always drove away an anxious thought, by substituting for it a cheerful one. The work was laid aside, and she left the room, but instead of going at once to the kitchen, she went first of all to the street door, opened it, and looked out. Nothing to be seen but the great white beautiful flakes fluttering and falling, so softly, so softly. The storm was not blowing from that side, there was not even a breath of air where she stood in the shadow of the porch, so the flakes fell softly, noiselessly, so white, so beautiful.

"Mildred!" she called out several times; but there was no answer. She closed the door, and went into the kitchen.

"Mildred is not returned yet?"

"No, Miss."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"You can bring up the tray and urn ; papa will soon be here. Mildred is at Roslynn, of course, or she would have been back long ago." Jane said this to herself rather than the servant, then she returned to the parlour ; as she opened the door a gust more boisterous even than the last came sweeping along, then died round the corner with a wild desolateness of sound.

"Jane ! Jane ! Are you there ? Let me in ! Oh, God ! let me in."

It was Mildred's voice ; it came from the French window, that leading into the garden was always open in the summer, but was now barred and curtained over. Mildred stood outside amid the gloom and storm, and Jane could hear how her little fingers strayed over the glass, and rattled at the handle, so eager she was to get in !

Jane drew back the curtain and tried to lift the bar, but her hand trembled so violently. It had trembled ever since that first sudden gust had so rudely awakened her from her pleasant thoughts.

"I can't open it, dear ; go round to the front door, I will open that for you."

"No, no, let me in here ; oh, Jane, do ! It is so dark, so cold !"

The little fingers were still shaking the handle, beating against the glass, the words came out with a broken sob.

With a violent effort Jane wrenched up the heavy, rusty bar, drew back the bolt, and Mildred

entered; and along with her entered the storm with a wild sob and howl, as if glad to have forced an entrance, drifting the snow along the floor. It was with difficulty the girls got the door to again with their united efforts. Mildred dashing against it her light weight, and beating at it angrily with her wee baby hands. "Yes, dear, shut it all out—all, all!" she whispered, eagerly.

The bolt secured, she turned back into the room.

"How nice it is in here—so light, so warm. Out there it is so cold and dark."

She knelt down before the fire, stretching out her hands towards the blaze.

The curtains drawn, Jane came and stood behind her, looking down upon her anxiously. She was bareheaded, and her hair, wet and storm-tossed, hung about her face, which looked white and scared as Jane had never seen it look before.

"The storm frightened you?" she asked, as she took off the heavy shawl.

Mildred shook her wet hair back from her face, and writhed her hands tight together as she held them yet closer to the flames.

"The storm frightened me? Oh, no! it only drove me on and on, it made me run, and took away my breath, but it did not frighten me."

"But your hair's quite wet, and where's your hat? You were surely not without it in such weather as this?"

Mildred raised her hand to her head as if to make sure that the hat was indeed missing, then

she let it drop to her side with a quick, impatient sigh.

"I don't know—I can't remember—I must have lost it in the storm. But never mind that now—where it fell it will lie, and the snow will cover it over. I wonder how deep the snow will be to-night? I wish it would go on falling, falling, until the whole earth is covered—so soft, so white, so deep!"

Mildred was thinking aloud; Jane knew it, and too much accustomed to these audible soliloquies to pay great attention to this one in particular, she rang for tea, and Mildred having risen from the rug, drew on to it the little low chair that had been her mother's, and in which she herself, when not at her father's feet or in his arms, had sat at his side for the last ten years. Resting her feet on the fender, her elbows on her knees, and her chin in her two open palms, she sat quite still, looking into the fire.

Jane bustled about, in and out, talking or silent, as the mood took her; every now and then glancing at the hearth where Mildred sat so quiet, apparently lost in thought. Suddenly lifting her face from her hands, she turned it slightly towards the window in a listening attitude.

"Do you hear nothing?"

"No, dear; do you? Oh, I see! you're listening for papa. Did you think to hear him? I wish he were back—I can't bear his being out these stormy nights, and on horseback too! Not but

what he has often been out in worse nights than this"—she added hastily, afraid of having alarmed Mildred by her own undefined fears—"and no doubt he will soon be back now."

"Yes, he will soon be back," Mildred answered, quietly. "It was not for him I was listening. The snow is falling still, falling heavily; don't you think so? It must be lying very deep now." And she let her head drop back upon her hands.

Jane was again beginning to feel nervous; now that she had Mildred safe within doors she was growing uneasy about papa. Many and many a time before had she watched and waited for his return throughout dark winter evenings, but she had never felt as she did now. At every fresh gust of wind that swept over the house she would start, and Mildred turning slightly round would repeat her former question in the same low hushed tone, as if asking it rather of herself than any one else.

They had already waited tea far beyond the usual hour, and as the Doctor did not come, the sisters sat down to it alone. It proved an unusually silent meal: Jane was no great talker, and it was generally Mildred's pretty childish prattle upon every subject, gossip excepted—for she spoke of things only, not people—that enlivened the little circle, and to-day she was the more silent of the two.

Tea over she returned to her seat by the fire, dropping back into the old attitude; and so she sat for nearly an hour.

Jane was in the store-room, busy with her

Saturday evening duties, when she heard the garden gate open, and slow, heavy steps coming up the gravel path to the house, the treading of many feet muffled by the carpet of snow over which they trod, so slow in their advance, so measured. What did it mean? Could her heart in its warning throb of agony have spoken true? Oh, God! oh, God! In a moment she was at the door. Two men, dark shadows merely seen through the veil of drifting snow, were advancing, carrying something between them, something that made their march so silent and so slow. "Oh, father, father!" A breath, a cry, a moment of time. How was it possible to condense so much of agony into so short a space! A wild forward spring, a blind outstretching of the arms, and Jane was on her father's breast.

"Hush, darling. I forgot that you might be frightened. Where's Mildred?"

There was no answer. How could he expect one at such a moment! Very gently he disengaged himself from the straining arms. He knew that his good brave-hearted little Jane would not give way, and he was right. A convulsive sob, a faintness, a great pain at the throbbing heart crushed back and subdued, and she turned to the bearers advancing so slowly step by step, and shuddered forth the monosyllable—"Who?"

"Mr. Reeves."

"Not dead?"

"I fear so. Where's Mildred? She must be kept away."

"I will go to her."

The two men with their ghastly burden were now ascending the steps. Jane had to brush past them on her way to the parlour. At the door she paused, there was a convulsive pressure of the shaking hands over her heart, from which rose the involuntary cry of horror, "Oh, God! if she loves him!" And she entered.

The fire was low, the lamp, unattended to, had burnt down and threw only a pale, sickly light over the room that but awhile ago had been all light and warmth, and now looked so drear and comfortless. Mildred still sat before the dying embers, her feet on the fender, her elbows on her knees, her chin resting on her outspread palms. She did not turn, nor even move—she had evidently heard nothing, knew nothing. Strange that she whose ear had been so strained to catch every passing sound should not have heard that awful death tread echoing so drearily through the house. She must have been deep buried in thought indeed! Afraid of betraying herself if questioned, and longing to know the truth, whatever it might be, Jane closed the door behind her softly, and stole along the passage to the surgery. Her low, timid knock was answered by the Doctor himself. His face was very pale and rigid, the face of a man who had just looked upon some sight of horror.

"Dead," he said, in answer to Jane's look, for she had not uttered a word; "quite dead."

"Mr. Reeves?"

"Yes."

A pause; then the involuntary cry of mingled horror and grief—

"God help her!"

Of whom was Jane thinking?

The Doctor was thinking of Mrs. Reeves.

"Poor thing!" he said, with a sigh. "What an awful shock it will be to her!"

"Does it—does he remain here?"

"No, I shall have him carried to the Lodge; then I must go and break the news to her. Where's Mildred?"

"In the parlour. She knows nothing."

"She must know nothing; go to her now, and get her off to bed as early as possible; tell her I shall not be back till late, not at all to-night, perhaps."

"Thank God she did not love him. Oh, thank God for that!" shuddered Jane as, the Doctor having left her, she turned back again to the parlour.

Through the half-open door she had caught sight of an outstretched form, a livid face, a nerveless trailing hand. And that lifeless, motionless mass, at which all gazed in speechless horror, was the man who had loved Mildred, whom Mildred might have loved.

"But she did not love him! No; thank God for that—thank God, thank God!" Amid so much grief and terror that one thought was a comfort still. It was a comfort too that she knew nothing of it, that she had not seen what she (Jane) had seen.

How could she, who had never looked upon death, have borne to look upon it for the first time thus?

In the parlour she found the fire out, the lamp too; the room was in total darkness. Was Mil-

dred there still? She called her in a low, awe-struck tone, scarcely above her breath.

"Are you here, dear?"

"Yes."

She must still be sitting before the empty grate; the voice came from there.

Jane groped about looking for the matches, very glad of the temporary darkness to hide the look that must, she knew, be darkening over her face. The matches found, she lit a candle. Yes, Mildred was still where she had left her, and in just the same attitude too.

"Wont you go to bed, dear? You look so tired; and papa wont be home till late—not at all tonight, perhaps. He sent word that we were not to wait up for him, as he should probably be detained."

Jane spoke with her face averted, and though she tried hard to steady her voice the words were got out with difficulty.

Mildred looked up hastily. "Yes, yes, dear, I know—never mind, I will go to bed."

The tone was low and submissive as that of a weary child; and, taking the candle from Jane, she went upstairs.

Jane was in an agony of suspense until she had seen her safe into her room, always dreading to see or hear something that might awaken her suspicions. But a dead silence reigned throughout the house; the Doctor with his ghastly charge must have left it by the back way.

Mildred in bed, she again went downstairs: a fit of feverish restlessness was upon her, she

could stay long nowhere ; now she was in the kitchen, seeing what the maids were about, now in the parlour to relight the fire, and make all bright and comfortable for her father's return, then out into the garden to see if he were not coming ; then, seized with an anxious thought of Mildred, she would go stealing noiselessly upstairs to look after her. But she always found her lying quite still and apparently asleep, her face turned to the wall, and half hidden in the coverlet.

The Doctor returned at last, looking very worn and jaded. He had been to Mrs. Reeves to break to her the shock of her nephew's death, and the scene, he said, had been a most trying one—a succession of shrieks, hysterics, and wild incoherent ravings against everybody and everything. Alone, he would have found it impossible to quiet her, but having fortunately met Mr. Eden in the village, and knowing the influence the young man possessed over the lady's excitable mind, he had persuaded the Curate to accompany him to Roslynn, and a few words from him had effected wonders. “He managed her as if she'd been his own mother,” concluded the Doctor, admiringly. “He is a capital fellow, is Eden—a really capital fellow!”

Involuntarily Jane bent her face lower—scarcely to hide the quick blush that had suffused it, for it was not likely that at such a moment the Doctor would notice any signs of emotion ; still the face was involuntarily bent, and she felt, even in that hour of anxiety and fear, what a

comfort it was to her that he was so good, and so fit for the work he had undertaken.

The Doctor next told her how he had found the unhappy young man. Riding home along the road that skirted the quarry, he had been startled by hearing a sharp, wild cry proceeding from the direction of the copse. There was something so strange, so unearthly, in the sound, half shout, half wail, that for a moment he paused irresolute, then, as it was not repeated, he sprang from his horse and scrambled through the hedge into the wood. But nothing was to be seen, either there or in the opening beyond. It was snowing fast, and very dark. He shouted several times, but there was no answer, and, uncertain what steps to take, he was beginning to doubt whether his ears might not, after all, have deceived him, when, remembering suddenly a strange figure, dirty and travel-worn, he had that afternoon seen leaning over a gate, not so very far from there, a new and horrible idea seized him. The stranger might have wandered to the spot, and, blinded by the snow-storm, might have lost his footing and fallen into the quarry. Advancing cautiously to the edge he looked in. At first he could distinguish nothing, but by-and-by, kneeling down and keeping his eye fixed on the hollow, he made out a dark object not unlike a human form stretched at the bottom, the white carpet of snow beneath and gleaming chalk sides of the pit throwing it into yet bolder relief. That it was the stranger who lay there he felt perfectly sure, and hearing at that

moment voices in the road beyond, he had shouted aloud for help, and the shout was answered by several voices. A party of workmen returning home from a neighbouring village had soon reached the spot. Torches were lit; two men went down into the pit, and the Doctor, who was watching them from above, saw by their gestures that his fears had been but too well founded. The torches were waved to and fro, and the light fell on the upturned face of the dead.

"Did you recognise him at once?" asked Jane, shuddering at the recollection of what she had seen through the half-open surgery door.

"No; not until they had brought him up. It must have been a heavy fall; the motionless body dragged up the steep ascent—it was a horrible sight."

"And he was quite dead when they brought him up?"

"Quite dead. But for the wild cry I heard, and which sounded like nothing human, I should have said he was killed in the fall; but he must have been lying there some little time when we found him, for he was half buried beneath the snow."

"Do you think he could have been—murdered?" asked Jane, below her breath; speaking out at last the thought that had been haunting her ever since she had looked upon that awful dead face.

"There's not the least reason to suspect foul play. I believe it to have been a mere accident,

caused by the darkness of the evening ; though what could have taken him to that dreary spot on such a day, at such an hour, must for ever remain a mystery. Is Mildred in bed ?”

“ Yes, and asleep ; I’m so glad she knows nothing. I wish she might never know. It will be a dreadful blow to her—it *must*.”

Jane looked very wistfully into the Doctor’s face. She longed to tell him why it would be a heavier blow to Mildred than to any one else perhaps, except the aunt. She longed to repeat aloud the reassurance she had given her own heart. “ But she does not love him—oh no ! thank God for that !” She had purposely laid a stress on the last word, but the Doctor did not notice it—he seemed buried in anxious painful thought.

“ Poor papa ! he is so tired and troubled to-night. I will tell him all to-morrow. Mildred must know nothing until I have told him.”

She brought him his supper, and he ate in perfect silence, only now and then glancing involuntarily towards the door, and from the door back again to the chair, where Mildred always sat beside him. The chair stood in its accustomed place, but the child was not there, and Jane knew that he missed her—missed her soft, caressing ways, the little hand stealing into his, or playing with his knife and fork, feeding herself and him with tit-bits from off his plate. It was the first time for many years that he had supped without her, and Jane saw that he missed her.

As he passed her bedroom door on his way to his own, he paused irresolute. "Do you think she is asleep?"

"Wont you go in and say good-night to her?"

Jane saw by his brightening look that she had guessed his wish. They went in together. Mildred's bed still stood in the distant corner of the great irregular room—the corner where had once stood the cradle in which she had lain, a wee, forlorn baby, fatherless, motherless, unless indeed the angel-mother might yet be said to live for her. Did the angel-mother watch over her still? Did she need such guardian care, surrounded as she was by the living love? God help us all! how could we any of us live out our life if human love, however great, were its only guard?

Mildred lay as before, her face turned to the wall; the Doctor thought she slept, but as he stooped down to kiss her, she flung her arm up from out of the bed and round his neck, drawing his head down to her with a sudden passionate gesture, then as suddenly she let him go, and buried her face in the coverlet. When he bade her good-night there was no answer—none that he heard at least; but under the counterpane there was a faint stir, and the sound as of a low smothered sob.

For some time after the Doctor was gone, Jane went creeping noiselessly about the room. "I shall not sleep a wink to-night, that's sure," she said, as she got into bed. But great indeed

must have been the sorrow that could keep our good little Jane awake much beyond the usual hour. She was soon fast asleep, and slept soundly for some hours.

She was awakened at last by hearing her own name called several times, whispered rather we should say, in a low, faint whisper, but it awoke her. Her first thought was Mildred. "Did you call, dear?"

"Yes."

The answer was so near that she started up in a fright. The dim early dawn was struggling in through the window, cold and grey; but it was dark still in that distant corner of the room, and Mildred, standing by the bed, made but a faint shadowy outline.

"Good gracious!" cried Jane, now fairly awake. "What's the matter? You'll catch your death of cold. Go back to bed, child."

She spoke almost angrily, for dark as it was she could see how the little white figure was shaking and trembling and shivering all over. "Are you ill?" she added, in quick alarm, as there was no answer.

"I—am so cold. It is so cold standing here. May I get upon your bed? No, no—not in," as Jane made place for her.

Trembling and shivering still, she got upon the bed; huddling together at the foot of it, the poor little cold feet tucked up under her. Jane wrapped about her a blanket, asking her again and again what was the matter? but the only answer she got was a hurried "Don't ask me

—don't speak to me—don't touch me! Oh, please don't!—and—I will tell you all.”

Jane waited patiently for what was to follow, too well accustomed to her sister's strange moods to interrupt the silence she had asked for.

There was a long pause; Mildred had dropped the white troubled face down upon her knees. It was well that Jane could not see how white and troubled it was.

“ Jane—I did it !”

The words, breathed rather than spoken, were scarcely audible; but Jane heard and answered to them, “ Did what, dear ?”

Lower still sank the bowed head, lower and lower. A convulsive shudder, a catching at the breath, then out came the wild passionate words, “ Derwent Reeves is dead—and—it was I who—murdered him ! Oh, Jane, it was I !”

“ Mildred !”

“ Yes, I knew that when they found him he would be dead. I knew it ! But I thought that the snow would go on falling, falling until it covered him quite over. It was papa who found him. I heard how they carried him in here—their steps were so slow—so heavy. I knew what they were carrying between them. I knew that God had not allowed his beautiful white snow to cover—— ”

“ Mildred ! Are you dreaming—are you mad ?” again interrupted Jane, whose blood froze in her veins at the girl's wild, awful words.

“ You did not know, of course not—how could

you?—nor papa, either; but you were sorry when you saw the poor dead face, and papa shook his head and was sorry too. And the fire went out and the light, and I was left in darkness and alone. After that, you came in and then papa. And you were together as usual; but I was alone still, in the darkness, quite alone. Oh, Jane!” with a sudden wail of passionate regret, “I could not help it—it was not my fault. Will it always be so dark? Must I always be alone—always—always, till I die?”

Almost beside herself with grief and horror—not knowing what to make of the awful words to which she had been forced to listen—haunted by the memory of the ghastly scene of the past evening, Jane half believed herself the victim of some hideous nightmare, and springing from the bed she was about to strike a light, when stopped by the wild impassioned clasp of Mildred’s arms. She too had sprung down from the bed, and now lay along the floor at her feet, embracing them with her clasped hands, her face crushed down upon them, covering them over with the bright wealth of her hair.

“Oh, don’t—don’t! I wish it would never be light again—never—never! I felt as if it never could; and when I saw the dawn and knew that it must soon be day, and light over the whole earth once more, I got up and came to you.”

A sudden thought had flashed across Jane’s mind.

“Where were you yesterday evening?”

“In the Quarry ; I went there to meet him. It was so cold, so dark, and it was snowing fast—fast ; but I knew that he would come, and he did. I heard him coming along the road. I heard him call me, and I went to meet him as I had promised I would. He told me that he loved me, and that I must leave all—papa, and you, and home—and go away with him. And when I talked to him of mamma and the roses that grew on her tree, he laughed, and tried to take my hand and kiss me. And then I remembered the red rose that I had flung into the pit, and which had looked so like a stain of blood. We were not standing by the hollow then, but when he tried to kiss me I went backwards—nearer and nearer—until we stood on the very edge. He did not know it, but I did, and I did not scream or cry. I did not say a word. Something seemed to tell me that he was wicked and cruel, that he would break the heart of the woman who trusted him and when he tried to seize me I pushed him with both my hands, and moved aside ; and there was a cry and a crash, and I ran away, the storm shrieking always at my back and driving me on.”

CHAPTER VII.



HOW great a change will a few hours sometimes bring about ; not in a household only, but in whole villages, towns, or even countries. War, fire, and inundation will transform the face of the land past recognition ; and even a private calamity will often cast a gloom over other homes not in any way affected by it.

A happier, more peaceful appearance than Beddington presented on the morning of St. Stephen's Day could not well be imagined, and lo ! twenty-four hours afterwards all was doubt, horror, and dismay. Mrs. Reeves's nephew found dead in Old Cross Quarry—murder, suicide, or at best a frightful accident ! All these thoughts went surging through the public mind. One holding desperately to the first suggestion, because the most tragic ; another to the second, because the most mysteriously interesting ; a few, and they but very few, to the last, because the most probable. A coroner's inquest pending, all Roslynn thrown into mourning, the much talked-of Christmas festivities in common decency suspended ! What could be worse ?

In every street, shop, and parlour were to be seen pale, scared faces, set in such close proximity

the one to the other that it was quite evident either kissing or mysterious confidences must be going on.

The Curate, with the double trouble—his own and that of another—lying heavy at his heart, sat on the sofa beside Mrs. Reeves, trying by his gentle holy breathings to soothe the paroxysms of her grief. Not for a moment had he left her since that last awful night, and though he looked pale and worn he sat on, patient and hopeful, waiting till the hour of release should come.

Doctor Graves had called the first thing in the morning, but soon left, finding her in such far better hands than his own. He was a rough comforter at best, and had but little sympathy for violent, outspoken grief.

As he reached his own door, he saw Jane standing at it, looking as he had never seen her look before.

“What is it?” There was no mistaking the drawn look of agony on her face. He knew that something was the matter. But what?

Her only answer was to pass on before him into the study, and there, steadying her voice and trying hard to make her words clear that they might not have to be repeated, for every word she uttered was torture, she told him what Mildred had told her the night before.

And so the second great sorrow fell upon John Graves’s home. The child Mildred had comforted him for that first sorrow; who would comfort him for this? When Jane had done speaking, father and daughter looked into each other’s face,

and felt that they understood each other perfectly.

"You are sure that she was at the Quarry?"

He had heard all Jane had to say, not a link was wanting in the chain of evidence; but still his strong mind shrank back appalled from the greatness of the calamity that had fallen upon them. His child, the living image of the dead sainted mother, mixed up with the ghastly tragedy of that winter night—horrible, too horrible!

"I found the hat she wore at the foot of a tree not many steps distant from the Quarry."

"She pushed him and he fell."

Jane wrung her hands despairingly, clasping them over her face.

"She could not help it; he went after her and she grew frightened. Whatever she did, it was only done in self-defence."

"Whatever she did, it was only done in self-defence," repeated John Graves, solemnly. "God help her; the sorrow is hers, but not the crime. She is guiltless before God and man."

Then for the first time Jane gave way, and sinking to the ground at his feet burst into an agony of tears. He at least did not misjudge her, he at least would love her none the less for the blight that had fallen upon her life.

John Graves stood rigid and unmoved, looking down at her where she knelt and wept. He did not try to comfort her, he was not thinking of her, but of the two who had filled up his life and made it beautiful.

"The child who has her eyes and smile," he murmured at last, speaking to himself, not Jane; "for whom she died—who was so dear to me for her sake."

Was! Did the word imply a reproach? It almost sounded like it.

Jane looked up in quick alarm.

"Could anything make her less dear to us?"

He had spoken so gently before, but now his face was stern and set. Was he angry with her after all?

"Mamma said that nothing must ever make us love her less; that what we could not understand we must forgive."

"Send her to me. I must speak with her."

"And you wont be angry with her? Oh, papa! You wouldn't be angry with her when she's so unhappy!"

Jane in the fervour of supplication had caught the Doctor's hand, and stood looking up into his face, tears running down her cheeks.

"Send her to me. I must speak with her—alone."

Was the tone stern, or only sad? With a slight frown he had disengaged himself from the detaining clasp, and Jane left the room weeping bitterly.

She did not go up at once; first of all, with a violent effort, she mastered her emotion, and by the time she had reached her own door she looked tolerably calm and composed.

She found Mildred up and dressed, and standing at the open window feeding the birds. Hear-

ing the door open, she turned round almost eagerly.

"Oh, Jane, they're getting so tame; just now a dear little robin hopped upon my hand and looked right up into my face; it was so pretty!"

Not a vestige was left on the sweet face of the past night's storm: her cheeks were rosy, her lips smiled; she was dressed with her usual care, and looked altogether bright and fresh and pretty. But as soon as she caught sight of Jane's poor worn face, with its swollen lids and quivering lips, all the light died out of her own, which grew quite white and awe-struck; her head drooped, her arms fell to her side. The sudden change would have been almost ludicrous had it not been so altogether pitiable.

"Papa is asking for you, dear."

"Have you told him all?"

"Yes."

A heavy sigh, and the great wistful eyes turned towards the door. "I will go."

Jane followed her closely to the study; she could not bear to lose sight of her, to trust her in her great trouble to any love but her own. Her father looked stern, his manner could be rough and impetuous. She longed to follow her in, but she dared not. He had said he must speak to Mildred alone, laying a stress upon the word, and his commands were not to be slighted. He could be harsh in look and word; and so though she would have given worlds to stand beside her throughout the interview, to answer

for her and shield her from even a breath of unkindness, she only opened the door to let her pass in, then closed it after her.

John Graves sat at his writing-table. Softly as the door had opened and closed, he must have heard it, but he did not look up; and Mildred, instead of running to his arms as she would have done at any other time, putting a stop to all idea of work for the next half-hour, at least—for after the night's separation there were always so many caresses to be given, so much to be said—moved slowly with downcast eyes along the room, her step inaudible over the carpet, until she had reached the back of the great leathern chair in which he sat. And there she stood, meek and expectant, as pale a little culprit as ever stood before her judge.

“Come here, Mildred.”

It was the first time that any words of his had sounded like a command.

The only notice she took of them was to get upon the lower rail of the old-fashioned high-backed chair, and winding her soft arms about his neck, droop her pretty head until it touched his shoulder. Then resting her chin upon it, she waited for what he would say next.

He said nothing; but as he felt the clasp of the child's warm arms about his neck, a thrill of agony ran through him. He seemed afraid to speak—afraid to break the spell of that mute embrace so suggestive of the perfect love and confidence that had hitherto existed between

them, but which a word on either side might now for ever destroy.

“Are you angry with me, papa?”

The little face had come nestling closer; he felt the soft cheek pressed against his.

“I am so sorry,” pleaded the low, childish voice, whispering the words into his ear. “I never meant to be wicked or cruel—but he laughed at mamma and her love, and the white roses on her tree; and when he came near and tried to touch me, I put out my hands to prevent him, and as I pushed him back he fell.”

“It was not your hand that made him fall; I cannot believe it—I cannot!”

“I wish you would, and forgive me and love me still, as Jane does.”

And the clinging arms tightened their clasp, and the bright head sank from his shoulder to his breast, the little white wobegone face hiding itself away there.

Was ever sorrow greater than that of John Graves at this moment? What had that first grief, so holy, so natural, been when compared to this?

“God forgive me for praying for you as I have done! Rather than see you what you are I could wish that you had been buried in your mother’s grave.”

“I wish I had. Mamma wished it too—she told Jane so; but that she left me here to comfort you.”

Mildred’s tone was as subdued as the Doctor’s had been passionate. The clinging arms relaxed their hold, she slid from the chair, and moved slowly away to the door.

"Mildred!"

It was her father's voice—the old loving voice that had called to her so often. The Doctor had risen and stood before her, his arms outstretched, the hard face distorted with emotion, great tears of agony standing in his eyes. She flew to him with a low, sharp cry.

"Oh, papa! forgive me. I did not mean to do it, God knows I didn't!"

"Yes, He knows it. Poor little hands!" And as the clasped hands lay against his breast, he bent down his head and kissed them.

"I did not hate him—I did not mean to be cruel. Whenever he was ill or had a headache I was so sorry—I brought him eau-de-Cologne and lent him my handkerchief; and now when I think of him as—you saw him, you know, papa"—with a long shudder—"pale and still and dead, I wish that I were dead too, that I might forget it all."

"Hush, hush, darling! don't say that. It was not as a curse your mother left you in the world. You are but a child still: your life lies before you; time will teach you to forget."

Would anything ever teach *him* to forget? would time ever efface from his memory the agony of that moment?

"You have not kissed me yet, papa."

The father's kiss, and with it the two great tears of agony still quivering in his eyes, fell on the girl's uplifted face. Her new baptism of sorrow.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR more than an hour after his interview with Mildred John Graves sat alone, pondering deeply and anxiously ; but when at last he rose and called Jane to him, his mind was made up. He had looked the future boldly in the face, and made his mind up to the worst. Mildred must leave the place at once, and unless new impressions effaced the remembrance of that night's dark tragedy, which in a nature childish and unthinking as hers was not unlikely, he must ultimately leave it too, and make for her a new home elsewhere. But of this he said nothing ; he only told Jane that Mildred must have a change, and that he had resolved upon sending her up to London to aunt Jane.

" But she must not go alone, papa."

" No, dear."

Once more father and daughter looked into each other's face, and felt that they understood each other perfectly. The chief burden of that dreadful secret must be borne by them—him and her ; and whatever sacrifices they might be called upon to make must be made, but never owned ; that would seem like a reproach, and how could they reproach the poor child for her misfortune !

Jane did not say that in leaving her father, her home, the parish duties that had become an absolute necessity of her life, and the new love, so doubly dear now that trouble had fallen upon her, she would be making a sacrifice, the greatest that could possibly be demanded of her; she said she would follow Mildred up to London, and so the matter was settled; also that they were to start the next day. Mildred heard of the arrangement made without a word either of assent or expostulation; she only turned a wistful troubled look from papa to sister Jane, then back again to papa, then left the room. Some minutes afterwards she returned, dressed for walking.

"Where are you going, dear?" asked Jane, alarmed at the idea of her going out where she might be met and questioned.

"I must bid them all good-bye."

"All who?"

There was no answer; Mildred had walked to the window and stood there, the great dreamy eyes looking out upon the snow-wrapped garden, the distant mist-clad hills, the wood and park; then slowly and absently, as if scarce knowing what she did, she unfastened her shawl, letting it drop to her feet. "No, no," she murmured, "I need not bid them good-bye; they are mine still, I shall carry them all away with me."

That evening, their last, Mildred sat in her usual place, close, very close to papa's side, all the closer for the parting that lay before them. Jane looked at them as they sat together hand

in hand in the full blaze of the winter fire, then very softly she rose and left them alone. Going up to her room she put on her cloak and hat, and left the house.

Beyond the village, on the other side of the common, lived a poor, blind, cripple woman, who for years had been under Jane's special protection. She could not go away without saying good-bye to her. She was blind, and could not guess at the sorrow that might, she feared, be so plainly read in her face.

As on the previous evening, the weather was cold and stormy, and Jane's teeth chattered in her head as she hurried along. She had turned off the high-road into the open exposed common; the wind blowing in her very teeth. Holding her shawl tightly around her with both hands, she was dashing on head foremost, when suddenly she ran into somebody's arms.

"Good evening, Miss Graves."

It needed not the quick upward glance to tell her who stood there, the only person in all Beddington she cared to meet.

"Mr. Eden!"

Very eagerly she took the proffered hand, forgetting to drop it at once, so glad was she to see him.

"How fortunate that we should just have happened to meet! I wished so much to speak with you."

"And I with you."

Had Jane not been so entirely engrossed with her own sorrow, she would not have failed to notice the strange dejection of his tone.

"I can't stop talking here, I'm going to Mrs. Raye, and must get home as soon as possible. Will you walk a little way with me?"

"Thank you."

The Curate was a man of few words, he turned, and walked on at her side in silence.

She was revolving in her mind how much or how little she might tell him without betraying Mildred's secret; and he too was equally busy with his own thoughts, wondering whether that was a fitting moment for him to speak to her of his late interview with the Rector. He was at all times averse to speaking of himself, shrinking more especially from sharing with any one the troubles he had been all his life accustomed to battle with single-handed; but then he was scrupulous on many points, and having once asked Jane Graves to share his life, he felt that it in a measure belonged to her, and that it would be an abuse of her confidence to hide anything from her.

Jane was the first to speak, abruptly, and with averted face.

"Mildred and I leave Beddington to-morrow on a visit to aunt Jane in London."

There was no mistaking the quick, sharp tone of pain. He turned an anxious look upon her face, but the darkness hid it from him.

"Going up to London, and to-morrow. It must have been a very sudden resolution. You did not mention it to me on Christmas Eve."

"I did not know of it then, I did not know of it until to-day."

At every word her voice grew more agitated.

A sudden thought flashing across Mr. Eden's mind made his cheek flush, and his next words low and hesitating, afraid of offending even in the offer of his sympathy.

"I think I understand, Mrs. Reeves told me that—that—I beg your pardon—it must have been a great shock."

Jane knew what he meant, his supposition was a very plausible one, and all Beddington would think as he did when they heard of Mildred Graves's sudden departure. But to Jane's truthful mind there was something peculiarly revolting in the connexion of love with that ghastly tragedy that had made of the strong man a corpse, and of the weak innocent little sister a murderess. She therefore answered in the words of simple truth. "Mildred did not care for Mr. Reeves—she did not like him."

"I beg your pardon. I am very glad. I was afraid that perhaps——"

"She loved him. No, she did not, thank God, she did not."

"But you have some trouble on your mind," he said, very hesitatingly. "Was it of that you wished to speak with me?"

No, she had not meant to speak with him of her trouble; but now a great longing seized her to do so. Oh, if she could but tell him all! he was so good, so loyal. If the secret were but her own that she might confide it to him, but it was not; and so she dared not own it, neither did she dare altogether to deny it. Could she

lie to the man she loved, who was one day to be her husband !

" You have some trouble on your mind. What is it ? "

He never for a moment doubted her readiness to share with him any trouble she might have. Had she perhaps heard of his dismissal from the curacy ? He could see that she was terribly agitated. " What is it, Jane ? "

It was the first time he had called her by her name, but it was spoken so gently, so gravely, that it in no way startled her ; on the contrary, it only increased the longing at her heart to tell him all.

" I wish I could tell you, but I can't—don't ask me—I did not mean to speak of it. "

" Of what ? You have a trouble you would keep from me ? "

" That I must keep from you. "

" Why ? "

" I have promised. "

A long pause came between these words, and the question that followed them, very gravely and sadly put.

" It is a secret ? "

" Yes. "

" That must be kept from me ? "

" That must be kept from every one but God ; and if He didn't know it, I should never dare to tell it even Him, " was the almost passionate answer.

" One question more, does it concern you ? "

" Yes—no—that is—— Oh ! Mr. Eden, don't

ask me any more questions. If I had not known you to be so good, if I had not trusted you so entirely, I should not have said so much ; but I couldn't lie to you when you asked, and yet I cannot tell you all. I can never tell you more than you already know."

"*Never !* Must that secret trouble always come between us ?"

What could she answer? Would the stain of blood ever be wiped away from the poor little sister's hand? She was a mere child, as the Doctor had said ; she might cease to grieve, she might even learn to forget ; but the secret must still be kept for her sake, and that of the dead mother.

We have said that there was in Charles Eden something of the spirit of the martyr ; there was in him something else too, which stood him in good stead in the daily walk of life. A sound, practical common-sense that made him equal to every emergency. He saw clearer and farther than most men ; he had seen from the first that Jane was the one woman who could make him happy, and whom he could make happy, and that no greater blessing could be granted to their lives than the being allowed to pass it together. But now he saw quite as clearly that the secret trouble that must never be told, that he must never share, that must not even be mentioned between them, by putting an end to all confidence, would estrange them more effectually than could any absence or vicissitude of fortune. She was brave and loyal-hearted, was

his little Jane, and she would love him none the less for being separated from him by so many miles, however many they might be ; but the separation of hearts and sympathy was another thing altogether. For a nature like hers, naturally so independent, there must be entire confidence, or there could be no chance of real happiness. In their position more especially, when they might have to live on faith and hope for years, any misunderstanding, any secret dividing their lives and interests, would be doubly fatal. All this he saw at a glance, and after a brief inward struggle, just as she was beginning to wonder at his silence, longing for some word that would help and comfort her—for her faith in him and his goodness was so great—he broke it by telling her simply and plainly what he thought. “Our position would at all times have been a hard one ; what you have now told me renders it impossible. Do you understand me ?”

The quick look of alarm lifted to his face told him that she did in part, but in part only.

“I dare not ask you for your confidence ; I therefore renounce all claim to your love.”

“You are angry with me. You suspect me of being unworthy of you.”

“No, indeed ; you are to me what you always were—the best woman I ever knew or care to know ; but I was not thinking of myself but you. You will see this later, and own that I decided for the best. Better part now, as friends, than live to be estranged ; better look

back upon these few days of union as a pleasant memory than an idle mockery."

She felt, even in that first moment of surprise and pain, that his words were good words, true and loyal; and dimly realized that the secret she dare not tell, must part them, as he had said, for ever.

"The thought of your love was my only comfort," she said, very sadly; but there was nothing of reproach in her tone.

"Thank you; I understand. It was a comfort to you because it was vaguely connected in your mind with help and sympathy; both being for ever over between us, any wish for either would be but a mere idle craving, and all idle cravings turn in time to bitterness."

"I could not have acted otherwise; you would not have wished me to——"

"I am sure of it; there are burdens that each heart must bear for itself; if yours be such an one, God help you!"

"And we remain friends?"

"A needless question," he answered, gently but coldly.

A long silence.

"And you have nothing more to say to me?"

She felt nervously anxious to hear his voice; in the silence that had fallen between them they seemed already parted, and her troubled heart sank within her.

"Yes, there is one thing more I would say. It must be clearly understood that we are both of us as free to act as if we had never met; whatever changes may take place in the life or

feelings of either of us, the other will have no right to complain. Owing each other nothing, we are free from all obligations ; you understand ?”

“ Yes ; but if things should change ; I do not see the possibility of it now ; but if they should ?”

“ The future lies in the hands of God ; in His hands let us leave it ; vain hopes of the future must not interfere with the present, or make it harder still to bear.”

Charles Eden, usually so timid, so hesitating both in word and action, could be firm and uncompromising enough when the happiness of another depended on his judgment. He might have decided differently had he not so thoroughly understood the nature of the woman with whom he had to deal.

Another silence, falling cold and drear between them ; then the quiet matter-of-fact question—
“ You are leaving to-morrow, you say ; is there anything I can do for you, as your friend and minister ?”

Had Jane followed the promptings of her warm, impulsive heart, she would have flung herself upon the stern, uncompromising breast that had so ruthlessly hardened itself against her, and cried out—“ Yes ! give me back what you have taken from me ; don’t forsake me because I am unhappy ; don’t withdraw from me the comfort I had in the thought of you !” But how seldom is it allowed to us to follow the promptings of our own wayward hearts ; fate leads, and we

follow because we must, and all the time we flatter ourselves that we are acting of our own free will ; vain delusion ! vain as are all our idle boasts. As steel to the magnet, so man to his fate.

Jane did not follow the promptings of her heart ; she took his words quite literally, as he had meant that they should be taken, and asked him to be kind to the poor who were more especially under her care. " There is poor Mrs. Raye and——"

" Thank you, you need not particularize them ; I know them all ; you may leave them to my care ; as long as I am here they shall want for nothing."

Had Jane known for how short a time he would be there she would hardly have been as easy upon the score of her pet *protégés*.

" Ah, here we are !" They had reached the cottage-gate. " We must say good-bye, I suppose ?"

" Yes, we must say good-bye."

It was well, perhaps, that it was dark, so that neither could look into the face of the other. In darkness and silence their hands met, then dropped apart.

" Poor papa ! he will be alone ; you will sometimes go and see him ?"

" Yes, certainly."

" And—and if he is sometimes a little ungracious, you wont mind it ?"

" No, indeed."

" I am very sorry ; I never thought that it

would end so ; I had hoped that my love would make you happy."

With her natural unselfishness, she was thinking far more of him just then than of herself, and her woman's heart yearned towards the man who, from a stern sense of right, could thus calmly set aside his every chance of happiness, for her love had made him happy ; he had told her so, and she had believed it—believed it still. Many another woman might have misjudged him—might have attributed his stoicism to indifference, but she did not. She even recognised, as we have before said, that he might be right—how, she could not tell, but she instinctively felt that he had acted wisely, and respected him all the more for the decision that must have cost him so much.

"I dare not look into the future, all is so dark, so hopeless now ; but if——"

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Looking into the future is never a good thing, I think ; the present only is ours, and our present, yours and mine, Miss Graves, is a very busy one, and the less of time and thought we spare away from it the better." He turned to go, but there was one thing more he wished to say to her before they parted—to repeat what he had already said, that all might be clear between them.

"You quite understand that you are perfectly free, as free as if no word—no word of attachment I mean—had ever passed between us. Whatever may happen in the future, whatever changes it may bring about, neither will have

any right to blame the other. They only have a right to blame who belong to one another."

These were his last words, except the few final ones of good-bye. She half hoped he would go in with her, or at least wait and accompany her home, but he did not ; he was no longer anything for her but the minister ; as the minister, he solemnly asked God to bless and keep her ; and she watched him walk away, watched him until the darkness hid him completely from her sight ; then she entered the cottage, very sick at heart, very sad and lonely.

And yet even in this first moment of separation there was a certain sense of relief in the thought that, belonging once more entirely to herself, she could devote her life unhesitatingly to Mildred.

CHAPTER IX.



MISS GRAVES, the Doctor's only sister, had a pretty house at Kensington, and "moved in very good society."

Every maiden lady has her hobby.

Miss Graves's hobby was gentility. She knew to a nicety what was genteel, and what was not ; she herself was the very prototype of gentility, and she knew it, and rejoiced. Her house, dress, tastes, and manners were genteel to a most painful degree. She had chosen Kensington as a place of residence because its gentility has been undisputed from time immemorial. Bordering upon the West End—gentility bordering upon aristocracy, delightful ! But only bordering, mind ; Miss Graves laid no claim to aristocratic show or luxury. She was only genteel—Kensington is only genteel—she was perfectly satisfied ! And her house chosen for its gentility, everything within it was regulated by the same spirit. Slim, long-waisted maids were chosen because—they look so genteel ! The hour of five was chosen as her dinner-hour because it lies midway between the fashionable hour of seven and the vulgar hour of two. Certain shops she patronized, less for the excellence of the wares than for their recognised gentility. Even the foundation of

her religious principles was gentility. Not Low Church—God forbid !—not extreme High Church either, but just a little inclining that way—only a little—for all that is noisy and over-demonstrative flavours of vulgarity, and Miss Graves was so very genteel.

When in the summer Miss Graves left home for a little change of air, she always chose the genteelest watering or seaside place, and the genteelest Square or Esplanade of which it could boast.

Once a doctor, who did not know her hobby as well as he did her constitution, having recommended a month at Margate, she fainted dead away for the second time in her life. The first time of her fainting was when a sailor-nephew, who had taken her by storm, and forced himself upon her shuddering hospitality for twenty-four hours, surreptitiously ordered in a supper more to his taste than his aunt's genteel sandwiches and sherry—viz., onions and cheese, and grog. That was a dead faint to be sure, and lasted so long that the said nephew rushed out and collared the first doctor he could lay hands on, and it was on recovering from it that she was ordered to Margate—and fainted away for the second time, as we have seen.

It is not saying much for Miss Graves's strength of mind that she fainted at sight of onions and grog, or at the sudden utterance of the word Margate ; but in justice to her, and the consistency of her principles, we can positively affirm that she would never have fainted,

had it not been rather a genteel weakness than otherwise. Indeed, as if in support of the argument that the mind exerts a very decided influence over the body, all her ailments were of a very genteel order. Headache she had tried for several years—it sounded so genteel—but the physicians all agreeing in their verdict that it arose entirely from the stomach, she grew alarmed, and gave it up. Neuralgia, coughs, languor, followed in succession, but having at last hit upon nerves, and finding them the most unexceptionable and genteel of all human infirmities, she stuck to them with praiseworthy fidelity.

It is seldom that in life we meet with the lucky individual who attains that at which he aims, and having attained is satisfied. It is an unwise but, alas! common ambition to aim at the unattainable. You are a capital good fellow and amusing enough in your way, but you aim at being a wit, and get laughed at for your pains. Or you write good novels which every one reads, but, not content with that, you insist upon being a poet and get cut to pieces, which is a most unpleasant form of martyrdom. Or you have just enough of learning to serve as a beacon light to warn people off the rock where you were stranded—but you aim at setting the Thames on fire and can't, and so you grow bitter and impair an excellent digestion, which is a thousand pities. Miss Graves, being an independent maiden lady, accountable to no one for her whims, might have aimed at a hundred unattainable things, but she

only aimed at gentility, and the moderateness of her desires insured success. What cared she that richer neighbours kept their carriage—she could be genteel, perfectly genteel without one, and so in that respect she kept the tenth commandment intact. What was it to her that footmen were kept at Nos. 1 and 2—gentility did not require one of her, and so she kept none, and was the quieter and happier for it. Footmen she well knew, from the unfortunate trick they have of looking upon the house they serve as a sort of harem, and themselves as a sort of sultan, the business of whose life is to be waited on and made love to by the handmaidens—have been known to place spinster ladies in very awkward positions. For Miss Graves this would have been dreadful—her morals were of the strictest order, and any delinquency among the slim long-waisted maid-servants would have been to her a death-blow.

Miss Graves was possessed of many a sterling quality, as her brother always said when speaking of her. She was a good Christian, a good mistress, and had been a devoted daughter, having nursed the ex-chemist through a long and tedious illness, and worn handsome mourning two years after his decease. But tender as was the remembrance she kept of him in her heart, she never spoke of him, simply because he was the ex-chemist, and that shocked all her ideas of gentility. "My brother the Doctor," on the contrary, she constantly spoke of, for his position was all that heart, her heart at least, could desire—a lucra-

tive and honourable profession, which he followed with gain and honour. She had reason to be proud of him, and she was.

When John ran away with the penniless daughter of a great Scotch house, his sister had disapproved of the step, in a lesser degree certainly than if he had carried off some low-born damsel, but still she had disapproved. Anything trenching on the wild and extravagant was always displeasing to her. Why could he not have chosen some well-dowered young lady in his own rank of life? True to her principles of aiming at nothing higher than gentility, either for herself or her family, she never boasted of the new connexion, though it was thought very much of in her immediate circle. On the other hand, however, the runaway match caused no breach between the brother and sister, as a *mésalliance* would undoubtedly have done. From the first, a perfect understanding had existed between the sisters-in-law; there had been an almost yearly exchange of visits, and many years after the poor young thing's death, when Miss Graves had proposed to her brother to marry again for the sake of the children, and he had answered quietly, "No, Jane, you must never speak of that; you knew her—and you must know that it is impossible—quite impossible!" She understood his feelings too well to press the point, and even respected him all the more for his fidelity to the dead love.

When a telegram announced the visit of her nieces, who had never before been up in London,

though surprised, she was in no way put out. Flurry was a word that found no place in her lexicon of gentility. The spare-room was always ready for visitors, and at the appointed hour the lady's maid was sent to the station, much to Jane's annoyance. Owing to her officious zeal, they reached Kensington minus a carpet bag and umbrella, and had a row with the cabman to boot, she having indicated a wrong turning, which took them ever so far out of the way.

Why is it that ladies' maids invariably lose their heads at railway stations?

Miss Graves's reception of her nieces was very kind, and as warm as was compatible with perfect gentility. Her first observation was that Jane was very like her father, to be sure, and Mildred the living image of her poor mother; and as the girl's head drooped, Jane looked at her anxiously, and taking her hand she held it close during the remainder of the interview.

That first evening was a terrible trial for Jane. Aunt put so many questions, and always turned to Mildred for the answers, Jane's brisk abrupt mode of reply jarring painfully on her susceptible nerves. But Mildred did not betray herself; every question was answered by a low, soft yes or no, and she sat so still and white, and looked so weary, that Jane's heart bled for her, and even aunt took pity on her at last, and sent her off to bed.

The explanation given by Jane of their sudden impromptu visit satisfied Miss Graves perfectly. When she heard of the dreadful tragedy of Old Cross Quarry, she shook her head sympathizingly,

and said, "Yes, yes, of course, poor child, it must have been a great shock; she is of so sensitive a nature—just like her mother. I always said so. She could never bear to hear of anything sad or dreadful. We wont speak of it again, my dear; better not, much better, you know. She must try and forget it."

In furtherance of this very rational idea, she took the girls a regular round of sight-seeing. Once up in London they must see everything, and Jane agreed; for, thinking only of Mildred, she decided that constant change of scene would do her more good than moping in her own room or being bored to death with morning calls in the drawing-room. Whether Mildred was really interested in all she saw, it would have been difficult to decide. At one time she would pass through streets, buildings, galleries, with listless step, and gaze, cold and abstracted, then suddenly her interest would grow fixed and intent, riveted by some object that had caught her fancy. Her cheek would flush, her lips part and quiver, her eyes light up with wild, eager fire. It was almost like an inspiration.

One day they drove through the City, and ascended to the top of St. Paul's. At dinner Mildred sat silent and thoughtful, her lips smiling every now and then, and moving, as if she were talking to herself. Aunt Jane asked her, laughingly, of what she was thinking.

"Of a house."

"A house?"

"Yes, such a dark, ugly house; and it was so

high, and the street so narrow, and all around was so dirty and wretched ; but in the highest window, quite up at the top, on the roof, there was a flower-pot, and in it a little flower, quite green and fresh. I was thinking about that house and the flower. Don't you think the people who live there must love it very much ?”

“ Dear me, what extraordinary fancies, to be sure !” exclaimed Miss Graves.

“ Don't you think so ?” repeated Mildred, turning the dreamy eyes on sister Jane.

“ Yes, dear, I should think so.”

Miss Graves, anxious to do the honours of the metropolis to her nieces thoroughly, took a box at the Opera. It was not often she allowed herself to be tempted into such extravagance, but when she did a thing she liked to do it handsomely ; and it was the girls' first visit to London, as she said to herself in excuse.

The box taken, a private fly was next ordered for the occasion ; the coachman wearing the brightest of blue coats, and the brightest of silver hatbands. Altogether it was a very genteel turn-out, and Miss Graves smiled complacently as she stepped into it.

Besides the aunt and nieces, a nephew had been invited to take a fourth seat in the fly and box—a nephew studying at King's College, who knowing his aunt's genteel propensities, appeared in the whitest of white waistcoats—the whitest of white kid gloves, half a mile too long, and hair more sleek and smooth than was ever puppy's back when fresh from the maternal lick-

ing. Of course he did all the clapping, and being somewhat precocious, and gallant to boot, he had even invested in a cornichon of bonbons for distribution among the ladies ; but being far too shy to offer them, he contrived to dispose of them much after the fashion of little Jack Horner—between the acts, and behind his aunt's back.

As a great deal of dying, killing, and shrill despair went on in the last acts, Jane, knowing Mildred's childish dread of all painful impressions, got quite frightened, and reproached herself for having allowed her to come. It was not until the final dropping of the curtain, when lovers, tyrannical father, inhuman brother, and half-a-dozen inoffensive personages, had fairly expired, breathing forth their souls in song, which always rose most shrill at the last gasp, that seeing Mildred's face remain unchanged—a little surprised, a little startled perhaps, but no way impressed ; she breathed freely, and ceased to torment herself with self-reproaches.

"Well, and how did it please you?" asked aunt Jane when the three found themselves once more in the drawing-room where the genteel sandwiches and sherry awaited them. She herself had been highly gratified, had shed a few quiet tears over the fate of the ill-starred prima donna and first tenor, and been thrilled by a certain mild sensation of excitement by no means unpleasant when the clash of swords announced the coming catastrophe.

"The clown's tricks in the pantomime pleased

me better," was Mildred's grave, demure answer.

"A clown's tricks better than an opera!" cried aunt Jane, aghast. She thought at first that her niece was joking, but her face told her that she was not. It was thoughtful, and a little troubled.

"Yes, that pleased me better, because I understood it better; I understand people going anywhere where they can be made to laugh, but not where they are made to cry. But I don't understand either how they can cry at what is not real, and be quite indifferent about the sad, sad things that meet them at every turning. There was that poor little girl we saw the other day who sold matches, and sat all alone under the archway, barefooted and bareheaded, in the cold and snow; people gave her a penny every now and then, but they did not cry to see her, though she looked so cold and wretched. And there was the school of blind children we met, all smiling so sadly, with the poor darkened eyes fixed upward as if looking for the light they would never find; and busy crowds of people passed them by, and stared and whispered, but no one cried. I know why people like to cry at the Opera and over a book, and not at the really sad things they see. I know quite well," and Mildred nodded several times, and put on a very wise look.

"You foolish child, why?"

"Because they like the excitement of grief, but not the pain; and that's why they find it

so easy to talk of other people's troubles, and so hard to talk of their own, for they've no real love, even for their friends, and don't really care whether they are unhappy or not."

Stern philosophy issuing from those soft baby lips, around which still lingered the child smile. It was too comical, Miss Graves laughed. "What can you know of such things."

"Yes, I know," went on Mildred, in a tone of strong conviction, but speaking slowly and musingly, as if rather to herself than any one else. "The other day, when Mrs. Millard's baby died, you went to see it, and then you came back and told us how it looked—how pretty and white and fat, just like a doll. You told this to every one, and how Mrs. Millard had cried, and you had told her not to cry, that she should be very glad the child had gone to heaven, and so you tried to comfort her, just because you did not really care for her or the poor pretty little baby who was dead—if you had you would have felt more as she did; you would not have told her to be comforted, because you would have known it was impossible, and you could not have spoken of it to every one; it would have hurt you too much, and made your heart too heavy."

Miss Graves, who had the reputation of being a most kind-hearted person, was half inclined to resent the child's pointed words; but looking into the thoughtful downcast face, so innocently unconscious of offence, her anger vanished.

CHAPTER X.



AND whilst the child Mildred was thus taking her first look out into the great world, and drawing her own conclusions from what she saw there, what had been going on at Beddington Hall? Well, the first thing, of course, had been a coroner's inquest, and the verdict returned was accidental death. Any idea of murder was not for a moment entertained, nor of suicide either. The unfortunate gentleman had wandered to the quarry, and, misled by the heavy snow and darkness of the evening, had lost his footing and fallen in. Why he had thus wandered to the bleakest, loneliest, and least likely place for a late winter walk, remained a problem, that might never more be solved, the one voice that could enlighten them being for ever silenced in the grave. Derwent Reeves was buried in the family vault, and people talked him and his death over and over again. That the Graves girls had left the place directly after the catastrophe excited no surprise; those who had their eyes open—and who has not his eyes open to his neighbours' concerns?—had seen enough to make them suspect that the young man's death had, perhaps, affected the younger Miss

Graves more than any one else, except the aunt.

The sisters had already been gone a month, and in the houses where Doctor Graves visited, going in and out as usual, no one thought of pitying him, nor would he have wished to give them any such thought. As the doctor, he was what he had always been, the keen, active, energetic man of science; and if his home life was gone—the sorrows that we keep to ourselves we must bear alone, and sorrows so borne in silence, and the inner sanctuary of the heart, are those that ennoble and strengthen. Gossip of a trouble, complain, fret, publish it on the house-tops, and you are relieved, but at the same time degraded.

Doctor Graves told no one that he missed his little Mildred, as he had told no one that he had missed her mother. If his head was bent lower as he sat by the sick-bed—if his step was slower as, the day's work over, he walked home amid the darkness and silence of the winter evening—who noticed the drooping head and lagging step? One person only, and he was silent too.

The girls had been gone a month, and during that time Jane had written every day, and cheering letters:—"Mildred never spoke of that dreadful day. She was not what she had been—oh no! but she did not seem unhappy, and often took an interest in what was going on around them; perhaps she was learning to forget. Aunt was very, very kind," &c.

Mildred also wrote—not every day, nor even

every third, but now and then—very strange, original little letters they were ; but one thing in them made the Doctor sigh—they never expressed the wish to see him or the home where she had been so happy. Was she learning to forget other things besides the sorrow that had parted them ? One month he waited patiently, then he went up to London.

The first thing he saw as the cab stopped at the gate of the pretty Kensington villa was Mildred standing at the window, her face pressed against it, her eyes, full of a great wistfulness, wandering over the garden and the dull road beyond. The bell rang—there was a start—a cry—a clapping of the hands, and even before he had reached the door it had opened, and Mildred was on his breast. How he had contrived to live out that weary month without the clasp of those arms about his neck was a thing he would at all times have found it difficult to explain—quite impossible at that moment.

“ Papa, papa ! ” She was covering his face with kisses, then drooped her own low down upon his breast. He held her to him without speaking, then put her away, only a little, however, just a little, that he might look into her face. Was it quite the same little face he had been accustomed to look into—not altered by the burden of that dreadful secret ?—not dimmed or marred, as has been many a face by trials less heavy, less hard to be borne ? No, not altered, or dimmed either ; the cheeks glowed, the lips smiled and pouted, no dark circles under the

eyes, telling of tears or sleepless nights ; no lines on the smooth childish brow. The sorrow that had nearly broken his heart had left her unchanged, and he thanked God for it.

" You have been well and happy, darling ? You like London ? "

" It is very large and dark, even here ; the sun doesn't shine as it did at home, and when it looks in at the drawing-room windows and aunt says it is so cheerful, it only makes me sad. "

The Doctor sighed. She missed the sunlight, but did she miss anything else ? Had he expected her to express a regret or longing for the love that seemed such an absolute necessity, but which she now seemed to do very well without ? If so, the stern, rough, grey-haired man must have sighed many a time before, for when had the passionate cry of his heart ever been responded to ? Soft words, and soft, sweet caresses he had had, for his wife, Mildred, was a soft, loving creature, and so was the child who bore her name, but he was not the first, nor will he be the last, who to the heart's yearning cry got no response but its own distant echo.

Miss Graves welcomed her brother in her usually quiet, genteel fashion, expressing no surprise, asking no questions. Jane ; on the contrary, had a hundred questions to ask, for the one month she had been from home seemed to her an eternity, and how many questions would we not ask of eternity, if we could ? Mildred did not ask any questions ; indeed, she hardly

spoke at all the whole evening; but she sat perched on the broad arm of the Doctor's chair—the one arm-chair tolerated by Miss Graves, and that only for the sake of brother John, who hated those new-fangled things that always seemed to be breaking down beneath his weight; a little too, perhaps, for the sake of the dead father who had always occupied it. For Miss Graves had been a good daughter, as we have before said. So the old brown leathern chair was tolerated, and though carefully hidden away out of sight, except when the Doctor was in Kensington, was always brought out at such times, and occupied the place of honour. In it the Doctor now sat, and on the arm of it was perched little Mildred, nestling close up against him, one big rough hand hugged up in her own, her bright head upon his shoulder, diversifying, yet scarcely interrupting, the conversation by soft kisses and whisperings. He half hoped that before he left on the following day she would express a wish to return home, but she did not. When they met at breakfast, and she took her usual place at his side, she whispered to him that she had had a dream, such a nice dream, that was quite like a reality. She was in a new place, and had walked on and on not knowing where she was, for a heavy mist hung around, but she did not fear to lose her way, for she always followed the sound of footsteps that were going on before. All at once as she walked the darkness vanished, and she stood upon a high rock, and at her feet, far down, and as far away as the eye

could reach, there lay the sea, sparkling and foaming in the sunlight—so wild, so beautiful!

"How can people always live in towns and care only for fine dresses and visiting when there are such beautiful things in the world? I wish I could see the sea, papa, as I saw it in my dream."

"You shall see it, darling."

Had ever wish of hers remained ungratified?

Some days after the Doctor's departure they got a letter from him which surprised Jane and the good aunt not a little. The elderly governess of whom mention has been made once before lived in one of the wildest and loveliest of our many lovely English seaside places, and there maintained herself by letting lodgings. In his letter the Doctor proposed Jane's going there with Mildred for a couple of months. The change would do them good, and he hoped ere long to be able himself to run down for a day or two.

"The seaside at this time of the year!" cried aunt Jane, aghast.

"To go so far from home!" sighed Jane.

"You'll find it awfully dull, my dears. Whatever could have put such an extravagant idea into my brother's head?"

"I know," said Mildred. "I know quite well. I'm so glad."

And Jane, hearing this, was satisfied, and neither sighed nor complained any more.

CHAPTER XI.



ONE bright cheery morning in the beginning of the month of February two girls might have been seen sitting in the waiting-room of one of our crowded London stations. They were about to undertake a longer journey than any they had ever taken in their lives ; they were going to the Isle of Wight, not to Ventnor or Ryde, but to a place which, if less frequented and fashionable, in winter at least, is quite as attractive, or more so, for those who do not care for fashion, and do care for nature in her grander aspects of gleaming rock and cliff, and wild, tossing, heaving, foaming ocean.

That the two girls were sisters was shown rather in the dress and natural clinging together than in anything else ; for whereas the one was simply a bright, pleasant-looking girl, the other was something altogether different, not only from that, but perhaps from anything else you or I, reader, may have seen in the course of our lives. A very strange-looking child she was, and yet not quite a child nor quite a woman either, but something between the two. That she was pretty would not be the first thing that struck you, not at least if you met the quiet veiled eyes as they wandered slowly round the room ; but if

she happened to be looking down and smiling at what her companion was saying to her in an audible whisper, you would say it was one of the prettiest faces you had ever seen, and for many a day it would haunt you pleasantly—so innocent and bright and soft.

Perhaps a gentleman coming in to fetch a certain plaid and hatbox that lay on the table may have thought something of the kind ; for with one hand on the plaid and the other on the box in the very act of lifting them up, he stopped short, brought his brows together, and looked keenly from under them at the distant corner where the sisters sat. Only for a moment, however, was his attention arrested, then the brows parted, the gaze was withdrawn, the box was lifted, the plaid flung over his shoulder, and the gentleman disappeared.

Jane had seen him, for her quick eager eyes saw everything ; Mildred had not. She sat, her lids drooping, smiling to herself, and tracing mysterious hieroglyphics on the floor with the point of her umbrella. Suddenly she looked up, round the room, and out at the window, as if seeking something.

“What is it, dear?”

“A ray of sunlight—didn’t you see it? It came dancing along the floor to my feet, and then it disappeared, so suddenly! I wish it hadn’t. I wish it would have stayed.”

“I thought you had perhaps missed something. I don’t feel at all sure even now that we have left nothing behind,” was the answer

of simple matter-of-fact Jane. But she need have been under no anxiety on that score. She leave anything behind, indeed ! There she did herself foul injustice, for being the very neatest and most methodical of little women, she was altogether incapable of it. Another thing of which she was altogether incapable was of being in a hurry. "Everything done in time, you have time for everything;" that was a favourite maxim of hers, and on the present occasion, true to it and herself, she had had everything packed and ready the previous evening, was at the station half an hour before the train was due ; and afterwards, when it was about to start, and distracted passengers were rushing up and down the platform calling wildly for places, but utterly disregarding those held open for them by the guard, screaming, gesticulating, making a headlong rush at third-class carriages when they had tickets for the first, or first when they had tickets for the third, Jane and her sister, like the wise virgins of Scripture, were ready and seated, calmly awaiting the course of events, their bags and baskets neatly arranged above their heads.

They had their compartment entirely to themselves, much to Jane's relief ; but just as the guard was heard banging to all the doors in succession, as the whistle sounded, and the train was about to move off, their door opened impetuously, and the gentleman Jane had already seen in the waiting-room sprang lightly on to the step, threw in the box and plaid ; but, perceiving the young ladies, made a backward movement. It was too

late for retreat, however ; the train was fairly on the move, and the guard urging him in from behind. There was nothing for it therefore but to follow his property and subside into a seat, which he did with a shrug of the broad shoulders, and a half-amused, half-rueful smile. He had with him, beside the box and plaid, a whole pile of newspapers, and he read them one after the other with much apparent interest ; then, taking off his wide-awake, he ran his fingers through his hair, and very fine hair it was, replaced it rather more over his eyes, and folding his arms across his breast, composed himself deliberately to sleep. That he did close his eyes with the intention of going to sleep we have no reason whatever to doubt. In this world of ours, so entirely made up of appearances, most of them, ay, all of them, more or less false, we can but take things as they seem, not as they really are. How shall we venture to say that the sleeper ever really sleeps, according to our acceptation of the word, even in that last solemn sleep, the most real, yet the least to be understood ? We see the closed eyes and the folded hands, and when the voice of faith, which is the voice of God, whispers at our heart, " This sleep is not unto death ; I go to wake him ? " we turn from the whisper with a heart-weary sigh, and echo the cry of the ignorant fishermen of Galilee, " If he sleep he shall do well."

Perhaps the stranger really slept, perhaps he only closed his eyes, to be the better able to think ; perhaps, even—shall we venture to suggest the

idea—to listen; for the younger and prettier sister, though silent for many a mile, had at last begun to talk, making quaint original remarks upon all that was going on around them. Arrived at a pretty picturesque little country station, she grew quite eager, leaning out of the window, and drawing her companion's attention to things that seemed hardly worth a notice. Suddenly she drew back, and sat down quite still and pale.

"What is it, dear?" asked Jane, anxiously; for not the slightest change in the little face escaped her.

"Never mind. Oh, poor mother!" The last words escaped her involuntarily, and clasping her hands tightly together she turned her head aside. As she did so, her eyes met those of the stranger fixed full upon her. He had seen what she had seen, felt something of what she had felt; his eyes told her so.

On the platform stood a poorly dressed woman in widow's weeds, thin, worn, and bent, though not old—not old at all. She was taking leave of a youth dressed as a sailor, and it was from this leave-taking Mildred had turned away, and turning had met the stranger's look. In no way abashed by it, she neither blushed nor simpered nor frowned; but as her eyes fell quietly beneath his she felt glad that some one besides herself was sorry for the poor heart-broken mother—and that he was sorry she felt sure, quite sure. That was the last station at which they were to stop for some time, and the train rushed on at a furious rate. The stranger did not again sleep

or read, but neither did he condescend to look out ; and, indeed, the winter scene that stretched before them, though cheerful enough, lying as it did beneath a sunlit sky, offered no particular attraction. Through tunnel, across the open country, past stations where figures appeared and vanished as by magic, on flew the train, puffing, snorting, rocking, vomiting forth smoke and soot and sparks in all directions ; other trains rushing past with a wild shriek until Jane grew quite giddy. Mildred had ceased to speak, and fallen into a reverie ; for her, surrounding objects were always connected with some bygone train of thought, some dream but half dreamt out, finding in the real its realization.

One tunnel more they had to pass, longer and darker than the rest, and as they emerged into light and life, as if from the very jaws of death and hell, there was a crash—a cry sent forth by a hundred voices, yet making but one sound in its wild chorus of dismay. And then Mildred, who had felt herself thrown violently forward, and had at the same time lost consciousness, tried to open her eyes, to clear from them the blood-weighted mist that seemed to have gathered before them and her. She put out her hand feebly, gropingly, and found it seized and clasped.

“She’s coming to.”

“Oh yes, thank God ! thank God !”

It was Jane’s voice that spoke, trembling with the double agony of joy and fear.

“I told you not to be afraid—that it was only a fainting fit.”

It was the stranger's voice, this ; she knew it, though the mist was still before her eyes, and she could not see him. Though she had not heard him speak a word, she knew that it was he who spoke now. The immediate presence of those two was the only thing of which she was at the moment conscious. But gradually her ideas cleared, the mist rolled away, with a long shudder quivering through her frame she awoke to life and reality. Oh, God ! and what a reality ! As she once more stood on her feet, and, opening with difficulty the heavy eyes, looked around, what a scene presented itself before her ! Gladly would she have sunk to the earth once more, and let the mist gather, and the stupor of insensibility fall, rather than look upon such a scene of horror.

The stranger's voice spoke again in a clear, decided tone.

"She's all right now. It was only the shock of the fall."

And as he said so, Mildred felt that she was all right ; she drew a deep breath, moistened her parched lips, and smiled faintly upon Jane, who smiled back at her, and tried very hard to be brave for Mildred's sake, and not burst out crying, as she felt so much inclined to do now that she was safe, and not killed, as she had at first believed.

The two sisters were alone now ; the stranger was gone. Mildred's eyes turned slowly from the sister smile as if looking for him, and Jane answered to the look.

"He has gone to see after the others—he seems so good."

They stood in a ploughed field on the top of a high bank, at the foot of which lay the train, overthrown and partly smashed—a ghastly ruin. Mildred saw this, but she saw nothing else; she would see nothing else. She stood rigid and motionless, her eyes fixed straight before her, not daring even to close them for fear of her fancy conjuring up something more hideous still than that reality.

Even Jane was stunned and bewildered by the unnatural horror of their position, and the wild tumult that was going on—not in their immediate vicinity indeed, for they were alone on that particular spot, but cries and shouts and an awful mingling of sound reached them where they stood clinging to each other—as those who love cling in the hour of danger.

Suddenly the stranger came bounding up the bank.

“Will you help me? There’s a poor fellow lying down there; they’ve overlooked him, I think. Here,” giving Jane a gutta-percha cup, “you’ll find a pond at the bottom of the field on that side; bring it me down yonder, by the engine.”

Jane turned to go, but Mildred clung to her so convulsively that she could not move.

“Come with me, dear; it isn’t far.”

“No, no; I can’t.”

“He was so good—it was he who saved your life, dragging you out from under the carriage, and he carried you up here—and if the poor man is hurt and wants water, dear, you know——”

The little hands relaxed their frantic hold.

"I will stay here."

"I shan't be gone a minute;" and Jane sped away like an arrow.

Half way down the bank the stranger stopped and turned, calling aloud to Mildred—"Come with me; I may need your help."

He was going in the opposite direction to the tunnel, from whence issued the wildest babel of confusion, and she followed him, partly perhaps because he had told her to, partly because she could not bear to be left behind.

At the foot of the bank, dragged as she had been from under the hideous mass, lay the figure of a man bleeding and senseless. As soon as Mildred saw him she stopped short, clasping her hands before her eyes.

The stranger had knelt down beside him, and as he laid his hand over his heart and felt that it still beat, he smiled, well pleased, and set to work in right good earnest. There was a gash in the head which had probably caused the protracted state of insensibility; this he bound up with his handkerchief, but as the wound was in the back of the head he feared to lay it down again upon the hard earth among the scattered ruins lying around. A thought struck him; he called once more to the girl standing midway up the bank. Come here, please; I want you."

His tone was one of simple command, and she obeyed it, and came and stood beside him, her back turned to the lifeless, mutilated heap at their feet.

"Will you sit down here, and let me put the poor fellow's head in your lap?"

She shrank back with a low cry, and put her hands behind her like a child suddenly bidden to touch some ugly, creeping thing.

"Oh no, no; I couldn't."

"His ankle is crushed, I fear; I must unlace his boot. If he should come to himself meanwhile, and raise his head, then dash it back upon the earth with that wound in it, the blow would prove fatal. Poor wretch! he'll have enough to suffer anyhow, without that."

"But it's bleeding—I know it is. I saw it all dripping with blood," shuddered forth Mildred below her breath.

The young lady was afraid of spoiling her pretty dress—quite natural too in so very young a lady, thought the stranger—and cold as it was, and exposed as they were just then to the cutting north wind, he stripped off his coat—"There, that will make all right; the blood wont go through that."

Mildred cast a despairing look around, but they were quite alone.

No Jane was near to take upon herself the burden of responsibility and spare her. They were quite alone, they two, he and she.

"Wont you help me?"

From his kneeling posture he was looking up at her, and there was a certain fascination in his voice as well as in his eyes; she meekly took the seat he had pointed out, and throwing into her lap the coat he had folded together so as to make

a pillow, he lifted on to it the grizzly head, all bloody and soot-begrimed as it was, and livid withal as that of a corpse.

"Thank you, that will do," said the stranger, with a sigh of infinite relief, and feeling very grateful indeed to the young lady for her help.

After that first shuddering refusal Mildred had offered no further opposition ; only, as she took her seat, she said, in the soft childish voice that few ever found it possible to resist—

"May I shut my eyes?"

The stranger smiled ; yes, in the midst of his anxious work and many fears, he smiled, a smile half pitying, half amused, and he softened his voice as he answered—"Certainly, you may do that and anything else you please, except move. I must ask you to keep very quiet ; so much depends upon that."

There was no fear of her not doing so ; with that dead, cruel weight pressing her down, she neither could nor would have moved—no, not if she had been ordered. Her eyes close shut, holding in her breath, and her hands still clasped behind her, she sat as white and motionless almost, as the wounded man himself.

The tumult was still going on at the other end towards the tunnel, but it did not touch them. They were quite alone, those two, partners in the same work—a work of mercy. Little did either of them think—— What? No matter—little do we any of us think or know of the future. And it is well, very well for us that we do not.

When Jane returned with the water, the first

thing upon which her eye fell was Mildred, sitting upon the ground at the foot of the bank, supporting a man's head in her lap, and looking what she undoubtedly was—a victim. Hot and indignant, she hurried to the rescue, and seeing the clasped hands, closed eyes, and woe-begone expression of the little white face, she felt as ready to quarrel with the bright-eyed, broad-shouldered stranger as she had ever done to quarrel with any one in her life; and it was only the sudden recollection that he had saved Mildred, for which she would ever be grateful to him, that checked the sharp impetuous words that rose to her lips. As it was, she handed him the water in perfect silence, then went and knelt down by her sister, encircling her with her arm.

“I will take your place now, dear.”

“Thank you, it would be better to leave things as they are,” put in the same pleasant but imperious voice that had not many minutes before stilled her despairing cry by the assurance that Mildred was safe; “I should prefer it.”

“But I'm so much more accustomed to sickness than she is—she knows nothing about it.”

“Oh, she does very well,” was the half-careless answer; and the keen eyes sent a quick upward glance to the girl's face. Something he saw there made the half-mocking, half-pitying smile quiver once more about his lips, accompanied by the involuntary mental ejaculation, “Poor little thing!”

“I should do better,” persisted Jane, who had a will of her own, and was not to be so easily deterred from following it.

"Never mind, dear," whispered Mildred, but without opening her eyes. "He said that if I moved, the poor man might die, and that would be so sad, you know. Leave it as it is; I don't mind much."

At that moment the pain in the foot eased by the removal of the boot, the man came to himself, opened his eyes, and lifted his head.

The stranger, seeing that he was not as seriously injured as he had at first feared, turned to the sisters—"Thank you for your help, but it's no longer needed, here at least; I can manage very well by myself now. If you keep on straight in that direction"—pointing across the fields—"you will reach the station, which is not half a mile distant. I should advise your not retracing your steps, or you might come upon some sight that would shock you—these railway accidents are frightful things."

Had Jane been alone she would have stayed and been in her element. Not cords would have dragged her from the spot where her services were required; but Mildred must, as ever, be her first consideration, her first care to see her out of danger, and as far removed as possible from every painful impression; she therefore turned at once to go.

One moment the stranger watched them, shaking back the hair that his bending posture had caused to fall over his eyes—one moment only—then he returned to his work, and the brown hair came tumbling back again over forehead and eyes, hiding their expression, whatever that may have been.

Excess of agitation held the sisters silent during their rapid walk. Hand in hand they hurried on, like the daughters of Lot fleeing from the doomed cities, not daring to look behind them, according to the warning given. It was only as they reached the station that Mildred spoke, but hesitatingly—"Jane——" Then a long pause.

"Yes, dear."

"You saw him when he was dead—did he look like that?"

Of what was she thinking?

Jane knew, and therefore found it impossible to answer. She hoped that Mildred would not repeat the question, but she did.

"Did he look like that, Jane? You saw him, you know. I didn't, only in my dreams, and dreams are sometimes very far from the truth—very, very far," she added, in a slow musing tone; "I have found them so. All the time I sat with that pale bleeding head upon my lap I thought of it, and it almost seemed as if it were his head I was supporting, and it weighed me down heavier and heavier—it was such a dreadful feeling!"

Still brooding over the old trouble. Of course; how could it be otherwise? Could even time wash away the stain of blood from the poor little hand? Jane had from the first owned to herself that it could not.

Another silence; then Mildred resumed, in an awe-struck tone, "And there was something else I thought of as I sat there. I don't know whether it was wrong to think so, but I couldn't help it."

"Well?"

A quiver of the lip, a slow down-drooping of the lids. "I thought that perhaps God had sent that dreadful accident as a punishment for what I did, and I was so sorry, and wished that all the poor people had been saved, and I only killed."

"There are many killed, I fear, and you were saved. It was God who saved you."

"And the stranger," added Mildred, quickly, almost eagerly. "He dragged me from under the train, and carried me up the bank. You said so."

"Yes."

"I'm so glad I did as he told me, so very glad;" spoken softly, and with a deep sigh of contentment.

CHAPTER XII.



MRS. MORTON, to whom had been entrusted the education of the Misses Graves, was a widow, and moreover, according to St. Paul's definition, "a widow indeed," having had, poor thing, much more of her widowhood than wifehood. Up to the age of twenty-five she had been a governess, ill-paid, and decidedly put upon. At the age of twenty-five she had married a cousin, a clerk in a wine merchant's office, and for two years had lived upon love, and an income that the merchant's daughter would have deemed altogether inadequate to defray the expenses of her wardrobe. But Mrs. Morton was satisfied, more than satisfied, perfectly happy, convinced that nothing was or could possibly be wanting in her life, until at the end of the two years a child was born unto her, and then, in the joy and pride of maternity, she owned that something had been wanting after all. In the third year she lost both husband and child, and went back to the old life with nothing left of those three years but the new name, and a few sweet holy memories that she would not for all the world have been without.

Did I say that she had gained nothing by her wifehood but a name and a few shadowy memo-

ries? I was wrong. Through them she had gained admittance into widowers' houses, and, believe me, reader, this is no such bad thing. Having for nigh upon three years "had her own house," that is, reigned over two rooms and a maid-of-all-work, superintended the cooking of chops one day in the week, the roasting of a joint another, and the serving it up cold the remaining five, she could with a clear conscience pronounce herself—"fully competent to undertake the management of a superior, well-regulated household;" and moreover, having nursed a baby of her own for nearly three months, she could with an equally clear conscience undertake the charge of children deprived of maternal care from the most tender to a more advanced age. What more could heart of widower desire? unless, indeed, it desired a second wife. So Mrs. Morton 'got into the widowers' houses, was neither ill-paid nor put upon, did her duty, and put by a tidy little sum yearly. Of all her situations, and she had many, the last was certainly the one where she was the best off. Six years she remained in Woodford House, well paid, well treated; and, having no matrimonial views, nor, indeed, any other views in particular, quite content with her lot, and happier than she had ever been, perhaps, except those three years which seemed now so much more of a dream than a reality—a thing belonging so entirely to the past, and the distant future, when she would once more meet her husband and her baby, and there would be no death to part them.

On leaving Woodford House, she had given up governessing, and taken to apartment-letting, and no bad speculation it had proved. Apartments let high at Badestone in the summer; Cliff Cottage was a pretty attractive villa, and Mrs. Morton lived an easy contented life upon her gains, her savings, and the Doctor's pension.

The winter months were of course her worst time; then she and Martha the maid had the cottage entirely to themselves; I say entirely, for Mrs. Morton had no pets of any kind, neither dog nor cat, nor even bird. She had once had a pet, a little white-headed red-faced pet who gave her far more trouble than it was at all worth, seeing how soon it went away and left her alone. Since that time she had never had a pet of any kind; she could not.

The winter being, as we have said, both a dull and unprofitable time, it may be imagined how eagerly she caught at the idea of a visit from her ex-pupils. The drawing-room and best bedroom were at once aired, heated, and set in apple-pie order, and on the day appointed, she stood on the Ryde pier, looking out for the boat. The boat came, and her pupils in it; and though it was late and cold when they reached Cliff Cottage, there was no keeping Mildred indoors. She must just go and see the sea where it lay beneath the winter moonlight, and hear it as it broke against the rocks. She went and was satisfied, and that night she was lulled to sleep by its wild and solemn music.

The Isle of Wight has been too generally explored, for the beautiful village of Badestone not to be well known to visitors; but the time was when it was known only to fishers and smugglers. Smugglers are now quite out of fashion, and their favourite and perhaps wildest haunt has come into it, and well it deserves its popularity. The village itself is charming—pretty, gay, white villas, with their surrounding gardens, a picturesque old church, the most modern and elegant of hotels, a promenade, bazaar, &c. &c. But what is the attraction of all these compared with the glorious country walks, woods and lanes and valleys on the one side, and on the other the sea?—the wonderful, tossing, foaming, gleaming sea, with its irregular shingly beach, and mighty framework of rock; and then the sunsets! glowing, flaming, as I verily believe they glow and flame nowhere else.

In the season Badestone is so overcrowded that visitors may deem themselves fortunate if they get two rooms where they confidently expected to get six; but the season over, they disappear as completely and suddenly as did the locusts from the land of Egypt at the bidding of Moses, and the place is left to itself like a faded beauty who, once surrounded, courted, run after, sees herself forsaken. And yet some there are who love her for her own sake, and not merely because she is the fashion, and these faithful lovers have built pretty houses, and live there all the year round.

It was with no little pride that Mrs. Morton

did the honours of the place to her young friends the day after their arrival. This was not a thing to be undertaken lightly, oh dear no! A certain respect was due to the young friends and—the place. So she put on her best black silk dress, a handsome Paisley shawl, the black velvet bonnet only worn on Sunday and for visits—because the sea air took the curl out of the feathers, which had then to be sent to a distant town to be arranged—and a pair of new kid gloves; and thus arrayed she sallied forth, a young lady on either side. She did not take them to rock or beach, cliff or wood—all that they could find out for themselves, besides which shingles were anything but favourable to kid boots and corns, and Mrs. Morton happened to be wearing kid boots and to be suffering from corns. No, she did not take them to rock or beach, but to all the fashionable haunts. First of all to the promenade at the end of which stood the hotel, a very pretty white building with innumerable balconies, looking rather chilly, however, that frosty morning.

“But you should see it in the season, my dears,” quoth Mrs. Morton, with a soft regretful sigh, such as a doating mother might heave on seeing baby show to less advantage before visitors than it might when, surrounded by a clean pinafore for instance, instead of a dirty one. “In the season, my dears, when the band plays, and the guests are all out in the garden playing croquet, or sitting under the trees—it is such an animated scene! At this time of the year you can of course form no idea of the cheerful

character of the place, always something going on, and such select company! Last year there were two lords, three baronets, and ever so many honourables. And that speaks well for a place, you see, my dears."

Mrs. Morton was as good as a handbook for crying up the merits of Badestone.

Jane's quick eye took all in at a glance—hotel, promenade, villas, &c. &c.—and seeing nothing so very remarkable about any one of them, she wondered that Mrs. Morton should find such a lot to say when each had a pair of eyes to judge for herself.

"And that red house yonder—you see. No, no, not there—a little more to your left; now—have you got it? That's the Rectory, so conveniently near to the church and churchyard as I am always telling the Rector." (Yes, she was always telling it him, and being an old, infirm, and highly nervous man, he had taken a very decided dislike to her in consequence, and never met her without a cold shudder creeping over him.) "And here, to your right, is the bazaar, where you find everything you can possibly want in the way of shells, seaweed, photographs, fancy work, and peppermint lozenges. I saw it opened, and a very pretty sight it was—flags and a band, and Lord McRacgallety among the company; the large brown shell on your mantelpiece, my dears, comes from there, for it's a real boon to the place, more especially when it rains, being covered, and should be patronized. No doubt before you go you will buy your dear

papa something from there; there's a choice assortment of shell-work ornaments of every kind, bracelets and pincushions."

"What would papa want with such things?" interrupted Jane, with more than her usual brusqueness, for she never let people talk nonsense if she could help it.

"No, dear, of course not," was the mild, almost deprecating response; "but there are other things besides—pen-wipers and shell boxes; it is always pleasant to take home some little memento of the place."

"But there are no shells in the place—only pebbles."

"Quite right, my dear, only pebbles—only pebbles, to be sure, and very pretty ones, too, and a great choice to be had in the bazaar."

"I found one this morning," here broke in Mildred, who had been down on the beach for hours. "It was all wet, and the sun was shining upon it; it was quite transparent, and I was so glad to have it; but when I looked at it afterwards it was dry and dark and ugly, and I threw it away."

They had now seen all that Mrs. Morton thought worth the showing. On their way home they passed a queer, old-fashioned looking house surrounded by a garden that must have been wonderfully pleasant and shady in the summer, but which looked rather dull now, from having so many trees about it. The house itself was almost invisible from the road; but Mildred, passing the gate, stopped short, and peeping in

through the iron railings, saw it quite well—a queer, small, irregular, grey building, gabled, with a heavy stone porch, and a great tree hiding one side of it.

Mrs. Morton had walked on some little way without missing Mildred. “Dear me!” she exclaimed, in surprise, as she turned and saw what she was about; “whatever can the child be stopping there for? Such an ugly house! I can’t understand how any one can choose to live there; but there’s no accounting for people’s tastes.”

“If I were a bird, I’d build my nest there,” said Mildred.

CHAPTER XIII.



RS. MORTON was no walker ; having been doomed for more years of her life than she had yet to live to a daily constitutional, she had had enough of it ; and, moreover, as we have said, she suffered from corns. So having done the honours of Badestone, or that part of it, at least, that she delighted to honour, she left her young charges to go their own way, which was about the very best thing she could have done. Chaperonage at that dead season of the year was quite unnecessary ; not a living soul was to be seen anywhere but at church, where a light sprinkling of both sexes was to be found on a Sunday. What they did with themselves the remaining six days must for ever remain a mystery, together with many another phase of human life. There were certainly, as we have before seen, pretty houses scattered here and there, and as certainly these houses were inhabited, yet no living soul was ever met with, at least, by the Grave girls. Free and independent, they could ramble about whole mornings—ay, and afternoons too, generally together, but it sometimes so happened that when Jane, equipped for a walk, went to look for Mildred she was gone ; and hours afterwards only would

she return, offering no explanation of her strange conduct, except the half-piteous "I couldn't help it, dear; I felt that I must go, and so I went." No weather was ever bad enough to keep her in—rain and mist and storm—no matter, she was out in them all, battling with and defying them. Jane was too well accustomed to her wayward doings to offer any decided opposition, and her gentle remonstrances were always met by the eager answer, "It does me so much good, dear—so much good! I feel the wind in my hair, and the roar of the waters is in my ears: I feel the breath of the storm around me, and I hear it rushing on—on, so wild, so boisterous, but it doesn't harm me—it wouldn't harm me, I know. When I was quite, quite happy, Jane, dear, you know, and all my thoughts were so beautiful and good, I didn't like the storm, it seemed unkind and cruel, but I like it now, because I understand and can answer to it, and it does me good—so much good!"

One day the sisters had had a longer walk even than usual, having been away many hours. They had gone on and on over the silver-gleaming cliffs, and, returning home along the beach, Mildred had run on before, stopping every now and then to watch the waves as they came rolling in, and sing to them and play with them as though they were indeed some living thing to be fondled and caressed. Many were the treasures she had gathered together on the way—pebbles and seaweed, and mosses that

she had found on the cliffs; and with all these she had filled Jane's handkerchief till it was no inconsiderable weight.

"But what will you do with all this *rubbish*?" Jane would have asked, but for a fear of wounding Mildred's feelings, for rubbish it certainly was in her eyes, and she would have preferred not using her handkerchief as a receptacle for so very wet and motley a collection, there being nothing worse than salt water for rotting linen. "They'll all get dry and ugly, you know, as the last did."

"Never mind, dear; they're pretty and bright now, and I'm so glad to have them. When they get dry and ugly you can throw them away. I couldn't bear to see them so."

Though Jane did not quite see why that could not be done now as well as later, she offered no further opposition, but continued to carry, and Mildred to collect.

As they entered the house and passed the parlour on their way up to their own room, they heard strange voices there, an unusual circumstance, for visiting did not go on very briskly at Badestone just then.

"There are visitors; let's make haste up," said Jane, who, never having in her life known what it was to fear anybody or anything, had actually, ever since the great trouble that had fallen upon them, become infected with Mildred's nervous dread of strangers, a dread which pursued her everywhere, even to church, so that

whenever she caught a glance more than usually earnest fixed upon the sweet childish face, and its childish sweetness made many look at it earnestly, she would grow hot and cold, and try to intercept the wandering look, as if it meant harm to the poor little sister who had that dreadful secret darkening over her life.

"Make haste, dear ; I think they're coming, and Mrs. Morton will insist upon introducing us."

Mildred had paused at the foot of the stairs, and was bending her head forward as if to listen ; then, without answering to Jane's words, with eyes downcast and head still slightly bent, she turned towards the parlour, opened the door, and entered.

Jane, lost in astonishment, followed.

There were two visitors. On the sofa a middle-aged lady, tall and stout, her features strongly marked and massive, thick braids of iron-grey hair waving low over the forehead, and the brightest and keenest of blue eyes.

Standing by the chimney-piece, his arm leant against it, was the second visitor—no stranger he, but their casual railway acquaintance.

There was a formal introduction of course, but Mrs. Morton spoke indistinctly, and the girls failed to catch the name. The elderly lady bowed slightly and very stiffly, so Jane thought, and her answering bow was equally stiff and far less graceful.

Mildred had not, as it would seem, even heard the introduction—at least she took no notice of it. Immediately upon entering the room her

eyes had turned upon the second visitor's face, and there they rested still.

On recognising the young ladies, perhaps because he remembered how unceremoniously he had treated them, the young man coloured slightly, lifted his eyebrows with a queer, half-amused, half-appealing look, and gave a shrug of the broad shoulders, all of which said, as plainly as words could have done, "If their remembrance of me isn't a very pleasant one I'm sorry, but it's not my fault."

"We're not quite such strangers as you think, Mrs. Morton; I and the young ladies have met before. I hope you got your luggage all right?"

"Oh yes, thank you," answered Jane, briskly; glad to turn from the stiff old lady to her more congenial companion.

"There was a great loss of property, I believe; but the accident was a far less serious one than was at first supposed. Only three lives lost."

This was said in an easy, careless tone.

"*Only three lives!*" echoed Jane.

"And the poor man—is he dead?"

Mildred had been slowly, and as it seemed unconsciously, approaching, until she stood close to the young man's elbow, so close that though her question was little more than a whisper he heard and answered to it.

"No, indeed; and by this time he is no doubt quite out of danger. I saw him safe off to the hospital, where he's doing well, I hope."

A few more words on either side, and the visitors left. Another formal bend of the head,

neither less stiff nor more gracious than the last, from the lady, and a grave, half-careless bow from the gentleman, and they were gone.

Mrs. Morton had much to say about her visitors. This was only their third visit. They had not called at all until she had sent for the son, who was a doctor, to attend an invalid lodger. The lady had the reputation of being awfully proud. Until some years back she and her husband had always lived in London, and "moved in the highest circle," keeping open house, and squandering away more money than they had to spend, for they had never been rich, and lived far beyond their income to keep up appearances ; and in return for routs, and dinners, and expensive concerts, the husband had the satisfaction of being called "quite a good fellow, though rather of a soft !" and the lady had the satisfaction of passing for an esprit fort, and was envied and disliked not a little. She would have been glad for her husband to do something that would have brought him in honour and money, for she was of an eager, ambitious nature, that could not be satisfied. But work was not in his line at all. His intimates called him an idle dog, and idle he certainly was ; and though possessed of talents that might well have been turned to account, he considered that fortune had treated him deucedly ill in not giving him a fortune that no debts or follies could exhaust. Well, his was exhausted at last, and no mistake, and then, as it never occurred to him that there was that in his brains that could yet

help him to fill it, and as he deemed it quite impossible to live any life but that to which he had always been accustomed—the life of fashion, of the club, the turf, the Opera-house, &c.—he somewhere or other picked up a cold, took to his bed, and died ; and the son, having a respect for the dead father's memory, paid his debts out of a small inheritance of his own, turned doctor, and came to settle at Badestone when it was yet in its infancy. And the widow, from being the most gracious and affable of hostesses, had grown stiff and cold and repellent, and withdrawing altogether from society, had shut herself up in the dull, old-fashioned grey-stone house, through the gate of which Mildred had passed not many days before.

“I knew that nice people must live there. I knew it !” Mildred said this softly, and smiling to herself.

Mrs. Morton lifted her eyebrows in surprise. The master and mistress of Rockstone were certainly not her beau ideal of nice people—the tall, dark-browed lady more especially ; and all she had just been relating was hardly calculated to impress the listener very favourably.

Some days after this the sisters were returning from one of their wanderings home along the beach. They had as usual been out for hours, and Jane was very tired. Not so Mildred. The longer she walked the brighter glowed her cheek, the lighter grew her step ; she seemed altogether above every physical weakness. And as Jane now watched her so eager, so interested, her

hair blown about the little face all flushed with air and exercise, she felt that the sacrifice she and father had made had not been in vain ; and she wondered again, as she had so often done before, how the awful secret that had blasted so many lives, could have left her the gay, thoughtless child she still was.

The tide was coming in. Mildred stopped short. "Oh, Jane, isn't it pretty to see the waves as they come dancing and sparkling over the pebbles, they look so happy."

Jane waited for some time ; but as Mildred seemed in no way inclined to proceed, she went and sat down on a slab of rock, deliciously placed, being sheltered from the wind on every side. This was the sisters' favourite seat, and was just large enough to hold two.

She had not sat there long when a voice close at hand made her start. Her thoughts had been far away. It was seldom that Jane allowed herself to think ; but at times, when more than usually weary in mind and body, she couldn't help it, and then somehow thought always seemed to comfort and strengthen her. It was strange how systematically she arranged her thoughts ; first came Mildred, then papa, and home and the poor ; and, last of all, the sandy-haired Curate. Having reached him they went no further, but rested there contentedly ; and from the thought of him it was that comfort came. It had come now after a little inward struggle. How rightly he had judged at that last interview she realized more fully every day. With

that terrible secret hanging over their lives the thought of their engagement would have been far more of a burden than a comfort. The consciousness of there being something that she must for ever keep from him would, to her frank, open nature, have seemed like a wrong done, and weighing heavily upon both heart and conscience, every thought of him would have been linked with bitterness and self-reproach ; whilst now, though sad, every thought of him was so sacred, so pleasant.

“ Good evening.”

Jane started and coloured, and felt no way reassured when, on looking up, she recognised Mrs. Morton’s dark-browed visitor.

“ I am afraid I startled you ; but the fact is you have usurped my favourite seat, which I have been accustomed to regard as private property. I am tired, and can’t feel at home anywhere else.”

“ I beg your pardon,” stammered Jane, rising precipitately.

The stranger lady quietly seated herself, then looked up at Jane with her bright blue eyes. “ There’s room for two ; pray sit down again.”

Jane would have much preferred joining Mildred and leaving her strange companion—and very strange she thought her—to the sole enjoyment of her stone ; but then she would perhaps fancy that she was offended, which she certainly was not, and so she resumed her seat.

“ You are very generous to resign your seat thus without a struggle, without even asking what

better right I have to it than you. That's a bad precedent, believe me, bad for yourself and others. What's worth the having must be worth the keeping ; and, besides, you take from your antagonist all the pride of victory. A thing meekly resigned for the mere claiming, what is left you but to feel ashamed of yourself, and beg pardon ? which I do, for having thus broken in upon your solitude.

Jane hardly knew whether her companion was laughing at her or really meant to apologize, so she said with more than her usual brusqueness of manner, " I'm sorry I took your place."

" That's a thing so often done in the world. We fancy that the place we occupy belongs to us of right, and that none other could possibly fill it. And lo ! we suddenly find it usurped ; and if we can laugh at our own blind delusion it is well."

Jane felt that no answer was expected, and she made none. A long silence ensued, and she was just weighing her chances of escape when her companion abruptly observed—

" It's for your little sister's health you're here, I suppose ?"

Jane coloured painfully, and flashed out upon her questioner a look of suspicious inquiry. She could no longer answer a simple question simply ; so now, instead of the laconic no, she, in her turn, put a question.

" What made you think so ?"

" She looks delicate, very delicate."

Jane's eyes, which had all along been fixed

upon the little figure that stood so rapt and motionless close to where the waves were coming in, now grew anxious and troubled. "You think she looks delicate? She was never ill, not once, from the day of her birth. What makes you think she is delicate?"

"Looks are often deceptive," was the careless answer, accompanied by a half yawn. "And then I could never have supposed that anything but health would have brought you here at this time of the year. Badestone is no winter resort."

"The sea is always beautiful, that is, I mean that it must be always beautiful. I never saw it until now."

"Yes, it is always beautiful!" This was not a mere indifferent assent, it was said slowly, being a deep conviction, as were all that strange woman's feelings more or less.

"Mildred likes it so much!"

"I like it too; I like everything that gives you the idea of infinity. If the horizon yonder were indeed the boundary, and the ocean ceased there as it seems to do, I should no longer care to look out over it. It is so painful to see the end of anything."

"But can we ever see the end of anything? Things cease or continue according to the length or shortness of our sight; perhaps you place the horizon that seems to bound the sea much farther than I do."

The blue eyes turned from the distant horizon to the young girl's face.

"You are a philosopher?"

"Oh no! I was but repeating what Mildred said yesterday, and I felt that what she said was true. Where the physical or moral view of the one ceases, that of the other begins; there must therefore be something of infinity in all that surrounds us."

"Your little sister said all that?" with a slightly sarcastic inflection of the voice.

"When I ask her what she is thinking about she tells me, and she thinks very much."

The blue eyes had turned coldly from her companion's face, and wandered away to the little figure standing so rapt and motionless where the waves were coming in; then she changed the conversation abruptly.

"You are for the first time by the seaside, you say?"

"Yes."

Jane did not see what right the stranger had to question her, and her answer was as cold as it was short.

"It is strange how very different an impression it makes upon you at different epochs of your life. When the heart is hot and restless, centred feverishly upon the present and the future, ceaseless tumult, suggesting the idea of eternal unrest, frets and almost maddens you, but when the struggle is over and you see how vain it all was, it is pleasant to sit with folded hands and watch it foam and dash and break against the rocks, seeing in its idle frettings but the lesson taught by the past."

It was hardly to Jane that all this was said, she seemed rather to be thinking aloud ; people get strange ways who live much alone, and sit and think for hours with the roar of the waters around them. With a sigh none the less deep because so subdued, she broke loose from the ever haunting train of thought into which she had once more fallen, and resumed the careless, indifferent tone that showed how little interest she took in her fellow-creatures.

“ You propose staying some time here ? ”

Again Jane was embarrassed and disconcerted, and would have given much to elude the question, but it was a simple one and must be answered.

“ Papa couldn’t spare us for very long ; he’s a doctor, and Beddington—— ”

“ Beddington ! You live at Beddington ! Ah ! to be sure, and your father is a doctor, Dr. Graves of Beddington ; I see. It’s strange that the name did not strike me at once. ”

“ You know papa ? ”

“ No ; but I knew your mother. We were related, distantly, it’s true, but still related ; we were both MacCullans. ”

Everything like surprise had already died out of the quiet voice—anything like emotion or pleasure it had never had, the discovery of her relationship had evidently affected her but little. It was a simple fact like any other, that could neither be denied nor set aside.

Jane was both surprised and affected, but not pleasantly ; she had heard enough of the cruel pride of her mother’s Scotch relatives, to prevent

her feeling any great pleasure in finding one here where they had hoped for the strictest seclusion.

"Ever since I first saw your sister I have been worried by a fancied likeness. It is her mother of course she resembles. I never saw Mildred MacCullan but once, when she was about your sister's age, fourteen or fifteen."

"Mildred is seventeen, she will be eighteen in June."

"Impossible, I should never have supposed her to be so old, and yet my son guessed her age exactly. He said she was no child, only a very childish-looking little creature. I should never certainly have taken her to be more than fourteen."

And Mildred's conduct at that moment would quite have justified any such supposition. She was kneeling down upon the shingly beach, holding out her arms to the advancing waves as if to embrace them as they approached. Then suddenly she sprang to her feet and came flying towards the spot where Jane sat, eager and breathless, holding something in her folded hands; but seeing for the first time that Jane was not alone, she stopped short, dropped what she was holding so closely down upon the sands, and as the eager light died out of her face, she came up slowly and demurely, as befitted her seventeen summers.

The newly-found relative held out her hand. She had not held it out to Jane, or felt any way inclined to do so, but there was that in Mildred

which instinctively drew all hearts to her, and the woman's hard features softened, and so did her voice too, as she took the small soft hand into hers.

"We have just made a discovery, your sister and I, that we are in a manner related through your mother."

"Very distantly," Jane made haste to add, resenting the careless, off-hand tone in which the last words had been spoken. "Mamma had no near relatives left at the time of her death."

"No, they all died off within a few years, and now I and my son Stephen are the last representatives of the family."

"Stephen—yes, I know, Stephen MacCullan—and you were a MacCullan too, and married your cousin, and always lived up in London, and when his father died your son turned doctor. I know all about it."

It was Mildred who had spoken, warmly, eagerly, a great sudden light coming into her eyes.

"And where did you get such very correct information?" Mrs. MacCullan asked, a slight cloud gathering over her brow.

Mildred did not answer, perhaps she had not even heard the question; her eyes downcast, her cheek flushed, she seemed busy with her own thoughts.

Jane now rose to go. At parting, Mrs. MacCullan shook hands with both sisters, but it was the younger sister's hand she was holding in hers as she said, "The thought that you, and we two—my son and I—are the last of the

family should be a bond of union between us ; don't you think so ?”

She still spoke as to a child, softly and coaxingly, and Mildred slowly raising to hers the eyes that were so unchildlike in their almost wild intensity of expression, answered gravely, so gravely that the elder lady felt somewhat disconcerted, “ Yes ; I think so.”

The two sisters gone, Mrs. MacCullan moved from the edge to the middle of the stone, shook out her skirts, and opened the book that had hitherto been lying idle in her lap.

Later on in the evening, much later, when she and her son Stephen sat together in the cosy drawing-room of Rockstone, where lamp and fire always burnt so brightly, she told him of that afternoon's rencontre and the discovery to which it had led, and half amused, but wholly indifferent, he listened to all she had to say, asking no questions, volunteering no remark, for in his evening pipe he found too keen an enjoyment to interrupt it lightly.

At about the same hour Jane sat down to write and tell papa of the new relation they had popped upon so unexpectedly ; and Mildred crept away to the window and sat there quiet as a mouse, looking out over the cliffs and far away beyond them over the sea that was fading, fading fast, and even when it had faded quite away out of sight, rock, sky, and ocean being shrouded in a grey solemn mist, she sat on still, and looked out with straining wistful eyes.

Jane's letter finished, she went and joined

Mildred where she sat, not breaking in upon her reverie, only standing close beside her, her hand laid lightly on her shoulder, just to show her, in case her thoughts were sad ones, that love and sympathy were near. And to this love and sympathy the girl turned, whispering as she dropped her cheek down upon the protecting hand—

“I wish that my life had had no past, or—that it would have no future.”

“Then it would be a very stupid life, I think,” Jane answered, cheerfully, “and I’m sure it wouldn’t make you happy.”

“And I feel that I could be so happy this evening—that if there were nothing to look back upon, nothing to regret, I could be so happy.”

Jane did not try to fathom her sister’s thoughts or feelings, only, scarce knowing what else to say, she asked the simple question—

“Why this evening?”

But there was no answer.

CHAPTER XIV.



RS. MACCULLAN never acted upon impulse, perhaps because there was no such thing as impulse in her nature, perhaps because having lived much in the world she knew it to be the very worst way in which you can act. Having discovered in Mrs. Morton's ex-pupils relations of her own, the only living relations indeed she had, for the family, consisting almost exclusively of old bachelors and old maids, who were both too poor and too proud to marry, had all died off—she took the matter very quietly, listened to her son's careless suggestion that, being relatives, they might as well be treated as such, waited another couple of days, to feel sure that she was not doing too much, that she was not taking upon herself a needless responsibility in thus burdening the future with a connexion that she might afterwards find it difficult to drop—though drop it of course she would if she saw fit, and they gave occasion, anything like intimacy not being at all what she intended, but a simple acknowledgment of a relationship she had no excuse for disowning—then sent a note to Cliff Terrace, inviting Miss Graves and her sister to tea.

“What shall we do?” asked Jane, who wished

from the bottom of her heart that they had chanced upon some place where there was no proud relation to patronize them, and deem herself privileged to ask impertinent questions.

Mildred opened her eyes very wide. "What shall we do? why, go of course."

"I don't believe she cares a straw whether we go or not."

"But she's mamma's relation, our only Scotch relation. I shall be so glad to go."

Mildred's word was law; and so they went to Rockstone, and were received by its mistress with a very quiet undemonstrative welcome. It gave her no particular pleasure to receive them in her home, and she did not wish them to think it did; but, on the other hand, she had no particular objection to their being there, and her manner expressed exactly what she felt—toleration of their presence.

She took them round the garden, observing at the same time that there was nothing whatever to be seen there; in the summer it was pleasant enough, but in the month of February every garden wore the same dreary aspect. Returned to the drawing-room she glanced at the clock, and wondered with a strangled yawn what she was to do with them for the next half-hour, when her son's return would, she hoped, take them a little off her hands. Sit them down to the piano, suggested reason. Heaven forbid! cried her nerves. Two young ladies from Beddington strumming vales or duets—horrible.

There was nothing for it but conversation;

so with another upward glance at the clock, and another suppressed yawn, she went through the customary repertoire, weather and scenery, with painfully long pauses between. The repertoire being at an end, and her son not yet home, she asked a few indifferent questions about Beddington, and then about one or two county families she had been acquainted with in London; but she seemed in no way disposed to be inquisitive about the private concerns of the Grave family, and for this Jane felt really grateful to her. Her father, as the Doctor, formed a very safe topic of conversation, and she spoke of him with no little pride; of his talents, his ever-increasing practice, the general esteem in which he was held, the general confidence he enjoyed; speaking with all the more warmth because of the contempt with which she well knew her father's honourable profession had been regarded by the MacCullans, the last of whom, however, had himself adopted it as if in very mockery of the ancestral pride.

As Jane enlarged upon the Doctor's active, useful career, realizing in its completeness the aim and object of his life, Mrs. MacCullan sighed. Mildred caught the sigh, and looked up. The woman's brow, lined by many a care and sorrow, was contracted as if with pain; and the girl's smooth brow, smooth as that of a young child, contracted slightly too, as if with sympathy. Could she have guessed the mother's bitter repining thoughts?

The half hour passed, and another added to it, but still Stephen MacCullan did not return.

"He's little enough to do in the winter," said his mother, with another involuntary sigh, "but to-day he has ridden over to Ryde to see a patient whom he attended here in the summer, and who will now have no one but him."

"He is so clever."

These were almost the first words that Mildred had spoken.

Mrs. MacCullan winced a little, and her pale cheek flushed. What business had that mere child to judge her son—her darling, her pride, from whom she had expected such great things—expectations which could never now be realized—praise of him from those baby lips seemed almost like an insult.

"You have had no proofs of his cleverness that I know of," she said, with impatient bitterness.

"Oh yes, I have; he saved my life, dragging me out from under the train, Jane said so. He also saved the poor engine-driver—we should both have died but for him—and—there he is."

"Who, dear?" asked Jane.

"Mr. MacCullan. I heard his horse's hoofs." And clasping her hands together, she half rose, a great light of gladness in her eyes. But it was not of the young doctor she was thinking, as her next words proved.

"I heard him just as I used to hear papa when he came home so tired and I ran out to meet him. He's no one to meet him now."

All the light had died out of the little face so radiant a moment before, but it was flushed

still, and the hands still clasped, when the door opened and Stephen MacCullan entered, not alone, for in stalked with him a great wolf-hound of an extraordinary size and altogether formidable appearance.

"For shame, Stephen, to bring the creature in to young lady strangers. He'll frighten them to death."

It is doubtful whether a veritable wolf would have frightened stout-hearted little Jane; but she looked uneasily at Mildred.

"Does he frighten you, dear?"

"I don't know—he's very big!"

"And have you a particular objection to everything that's big?" asked Stephen, with a slight elevation of the eyebrows, that gave such a queer half-serious, half-mocking expression to his face. And asking this there was a slight rearing of the head, and expanding of the broad chest and shoulders. If the new-found relative objected to whatever was big there was little chance of his finding favour in her eyes. For the young Badestone doctor was as fine a specimen of manhood, speaking of its physical advantages of health, and strength, and power, as God ever made—at least in the nineteenth century, for we are not now in the days when giants flourished. There are persons that you can never imagine to have been young, others you can never imagine growing old. Stephen MacCullan ranked among the latter. You could never realize his losing anything of the Godlike strength and vigour of frame with which nature

had so lavishly endowed him. Looking at him you felt glad, yes, positively glad, that he had no father, bearing perhaps his features, with whom you might be tempted to compare him, with the mental exclamation, "Behold him now, and as he will be thirty years hence !" It would be actually painful to have to think of him other than you saw him. Could that forest of brown curls, so soft, so abundant, ever grow grey or scant, a bald patch disfiguring the proud head now so richly crowned ? or those gleaming teeth, so strong, so perfect, not one wanting, not one discoloured, could they ever sicken and decay and drop out, leaving unsightly chasms, or be replaced by false ones ? Or the full lips so sternly set in repose, yet ever ready to break forth into a smile, could they ever lose their fresh suppleness of expression ? Or the grand figure with its just proportions, could it ever degenerate into gauntness, or, which was far more probable, alas, into corpulence ? No, nothing of all this could you realize, and looking at him you rejoiced in his being what he was—himself, nothing more nor less—not handsome, exactly—not interesting, exactly either ; he was too full of life, strength, and vitality, with too much of the mere animal about him for that ; but something better than either—nay, than both put together. Many said that he was quite unfit for his profession, that he would have made a splendid soldier or fox-hunter ; but that in a sick-room and surgery he was out of place. He thought very differently, however, and believed that just there he

was in his right place. Whether he was a better judge of his own fitness than any one else could possibly be, I leave it to the reader to decide.

But we left him, with lifted eyebrows, awaiting the young lady's answer to his question, whether she had a particular dislike to everything big.

"Oh no; I had dogs at home quite as big as that, and I fed them every day; but then they knew they must not bark at me or bite me."

"Nor will Woolfert, I assure you; he fights shy of young ladies in general; but he knows pretty well how to behave in their company."

Stephen MacCullan also spoke to Mildred as if she were the child his mother had taken her to be. "Go up to that young lady, sir," he said, turning to the dog, who still kept at his heels, "and tell her you're not quite the bad fellow you look."

Woolfert walked deliberately up to the low chair where Mildred sat, watching his leisurely approach with wide-open, doubting eyes. Having reached it, he put his huge head gravely down upon her lap, and looking her fixedly in the face, gave vent to a low portentous growl.

"He's growling," she said, under her breath, with an appealing upward look at Woolfert's master.

"Only his way of formally introducing himself."

"But if he growls he'll bite."

"Not he—he never yet bit a lady; and he's of far too noble a nature to begin with *you*."

Well might Stephen lay a stress on the last word—well might he deem that it would be an act of cowardice, as well as cruelty, to harm the soft little creature with the great wistful eyes and childish tremulous lips.

“ You’d like to make friends with him, wouldn’t you ?”

“ Oh yes.”

“ Then pat his head, and show that you’re not afraid of him.”

“ Oh, but I am—a little.”

“ Can’t you repose the same trust in him he did in you ? See how confidently he went up to you when bidden.”

“ But he’s so big, and—I’m so little.

Stephen laughed aloud.

“ I see that it’s still his size that’s the great objection ; but his heart’s as large as his frame. He won’t hurt you.”

“ He won’t bite, you’re quite, quite sure ?”

“ Have you so little confidence in me as well as in my dog ?”

Woolfert’s lurid gaze was still fixed upon her, and he was growling with low suppressed menace.

The small hand fluttered awhile over the great head, then, lightly descending, touched, then patted it : a mark of confidence in both master and dog that the latter acknowledged by a slow, majestic wave of the tail, the former by a smile.

“ Shall I call him off now ?”

“ Oh no, please don’t, if he likes to stay.”

And stay he did, apparently well pleased to be caressed by those soft downy fingers.

Mrs. MacCullan, who had left the room some minutes before, perhaps to look after the tea, for she was an excellent housewife, superintending the arrangement of everything, now when there was so little to superintend, with the same care and exactness as when she had kept open house, and received with so much grace and brilliance, now returned, and congratulated Mildred upon the friendly footing on which she found her with the formidable hound.

"I'm so glad to have made friends with him ; I'm so glad to have believed what *he* told me," with a shy, upward glance at the master's stalwart form. "If I hadn't made friends with him at once he would never have liked me, and I should have been so sorry."

"Quite right, Miss Mildred," assented Stephen, still laughing. "A noble nature never forgives a want of confidence ; nothing is more wounding to the feelings."

Mildred felt very glad that she had not wounded Woolfert's feelings, but more so that she had not wounded those of his master.

"I'm so glad I did as he told me," she repeated for the second time.

CHAPTER XV.



MRS. MACCULLAN, having asked the girls to tea, thought she had done as much as could possibly be expected of her under the circumstances ; and the weather being anything but favourable for visiting, the sisters heard nothing of her for several days. Once, soon after that first evening at Rockstone, they had called, but she was out, or professed to be so, and Jane had heard enough of the pride of her Scotch relatives to make no further advances.

For more than a week it had rained almost incessantly ; and, whenever it did not rain, there were rough storms of wind that made walking on those steep exposed cliffs almost impossible—almost, but not quite ; for no weather, however rough and stormy, could keep Mildred from those same cliffs, much to Mrs. Morton's horror and alarm. How any rational person, not a smuggler or fisher, could go out in such frightful weather, when a kind Providence allowed of his staying quietly at home, with a good fire and the comfort of an easy chair, was what she could not conceive. Storm and rain and mist for more than a week, and then such a glorious day ! Such a sunsmile over the waters ; such a fragrant balminess in

the air ! It was a day to make the driest, most careworn heart grow young and warm once more. A glorious day ! with a certain solemnity in its beauty, because of the dark clouds and storm that had preceded it. Vessels in full sail in the offing ; fishing boats putting off in all directions ; the shout of children at play on the beach ; the long line of rocks glistening silver bright in the distance. A real spring day, all light and promise, that led you to enjoy the present and dream of the future.

The sisters had been out the whole morning. In the afternoon Jane sat down to write to her old cripple friend, Mrs. Raye, the thought of whom lay often heavy at her heart ; and Mildred, seeing her busy, slipped quietly out. How could she stay indoors when the sea was dimpling and sparkling below her windows, beckoning her forth with every rippling, sunlit wave ? Hat and jacket were on in a moment, and a few flying steps brought her to the rocky point where she had stood and listened to the sea the first evening of her arrival, and many a time since. But never had it looked as it did to-day. She hailed it with outstretched arms and a cry of delight.

“ How beautiful, how beautiful ! ”

Some one, who had come up behind her unheard, caught the involuntary exclamation and laughed.

It was Stephen MacCullan. “ Good evening, Miss Mildred.”

She did not respond to his salutation, but,

looking up at him, asked, with almost comical gravity, "Was it you who laughed?"

"Yes, it was I. Why not?"

Without answering the question, she turned from him, grave and thoughtful.

"You're not angry with me for laughing?"

"Oh no, it isn't that; I—was trying to remember."

"Remember what?" asked Stephen, fairly puzzled.

"I know." Her face cleared, and she let her eyes droop from the distant sea to the ground at her feet. "It was only a dream I had in London when I was with Aunt Jane, and had grown so tired of streets and shops, and visits and museums. I don't like museums. Do you?"

"Not particularly."

"And one night I had a dream, that I stood upon a rock, and a mist was all around me; but suddenly it cleared away, and I saw the sea below me sparkling and dancing in the sunlight, just as it does now, and there were vessels and boats, and I was so happy and cried out—and then some one behind me laughed——"

"And that some one was Stephen MacCullan?"

"I don't know, for as I turned I awoke. But that dream first gave me a wish to see the sea. I had never seen it then; and when I told papa he arranged for us to come here."

"And the reality realized your expectations, I hope?"

"Oh yes; nature could never disappoint, I

think, because it is perfect. Whatever disappoints must be imperfect. But where's Woolfert?"

"At home, poor fellow; I was on my way to fetch him for a walk. We always take our evening stroll together; and generally along the cliffs."

"I never saw you."

"We have often seen you, Woolfert and I; but we kept at a respectful distance, not venturing to break in upon your solitude. This seems a favourite haunt of yours, but rather exposed in stormy weather, such as we have been having lately."

"I've two favourite haunts, this one when the weather is calm as it is now, and another for stormy days; it's so sheltered there that you can stand quite secure in the roughest gale—but you can only get at it from the beach, by climbing up ever so high."

Stephen looked grave. "I know the spot you mean. It commands a glorious view of sea and rock; but an old fisherman once told me that at certain times of the year, at high tide or after a storm, the water sweeps quite over it, and as there is no exit except along the beach it is a very dangerous spot. Pray take care, therefore, and never go when the tide is coming in. To find yourself suddenly surrounded, on that wild isolated rock, with the advancing tide rising higher and higher, would be anything but an agreeable position."

He spoke in the half serious, half careless tone in which we speak of danger to one for whom

we care too little to take the possibility of a risk very much to heart.

"Yes," she said, musingly, as if thinking aloud, and her eyes wandered away, far away, until they seemed lost in vacancy, "I can so well fancy how that would be; to stand as you say on that lonely rock, where you had spent so many happy hours, and that had always seemed to you like a friend, looking out over the sea that can be so beautiful and so cruel at the same time, and watching it as it comes nearer and nearer, higher and higher, until it washes the foot of the rock, then dashes up against it, then over it to your very feet; then higher and higher still—higher and higher, nearer and nearer, until all is over. I wonder if it would be so very dreadful?"

"I should advise you not to try it."

She turned her eyes slowly back upon him, where he stood behind her, and let them rest awhile upon his face.

It was very seldom that any one got such a look into Mildred's eyes as Stephen got then. To few she ever gave more than a sidelong glance, withdrawn almost before it was given—a flash, nothing more. But now for the first time he looked into them, right down into them, as she stood below him, her gaze uplifted to meet his. What peculiar look he caught in them he could not have told. Was it reproach, or sorrow—or only the shadow of a troubled thought? Certain it is that he had never caught such a look in any other eyes before.

"Good-bye," she said at last, quietly and softly. "I am going home."

She held out her hand. He had not dreamt of her doing so; he would never have dreamt of offering her his, though his mother had talked of a relationship that should make them something more than strangers—but when she offered it him he accepted it. It was ungloved, and as he took it, soft and warm and throbbing, into his, a queer feeling came over him, never felt before—a thrill, an emotion, transient but intense enough to make of it a life-long memory—not pleasure, not pain, nothing indeed that has a name or that could be put into words.

He echoed her good-bye mechanically, and let her go, without even offering to accompany her home.

CHAPTER XVI.



WHEN Dr. Graves heard from Jane of the new relation they had picked up, he hardly knew whether to be more vexed or pleased. His own experience of his wife's relations had, it is true, been anything but a pleasant one. But then, on the other hand, it did not follow that because he had been insulted and wronged by a MacCullan, or rather by half-a-dozen MacCullans, his children should be so too ; and as he gathered from Jane's letter that the relationship had been readily accepted, he let things take their course, and even hoped that the new tie might prove of service to Mildred, by turning her thoughts from the one channel into which his ever ran, and why not hers?

Jane wrote constantly and cheerfully—Mildred was well, quite well ; as rosy and bright as ever, so that no one seeing her could possibly guess that she had any secret trouble. One thing only showed that she had not forgotten—she could bear no allusion to the past, and never spoke of home, or expressed the slightest wish to return there.

"She must not return," the Doctor said to himself, as he read this. "Another home must be found for her."

He said nothing of the sacrifice such a change would entail upon him. To leave the place where he had worked for more than thirty years—the old home where he had known nine years of such perfect happiness, where the young Scotch bride had been brought—where the wife had lived and loved, and suffered, and died—where the child for whom no sacrifice was too great had been born, and spent the seventeen years of her bright, unclouded girlhood, to give up his profession and end his days in a strange place far from Mildred's grave. Put into words the sacrifice was a cruel one, indeed ; but he never put it into words thus—he only said, “ She must have another home found for her—a new home where she may at last learn to forget.”

Those who cared sufficiently for Dr. Graves to remark upon his altered looks, said that he looked almost as bad as when his wife had died ; and this, taken in conjunction with the girl's protracted absence, made people shake their heads and whisper darkly. One whisper, because darker and more suggestive than all the rest, became very popular and circulated widely—a lover's quarrel—perhaps, even a downright refusal!—despair—suicide—unavailing remorse and flight ! What mighty structure could not be built up by scandal with such materials.

Fortunately for us the world's cruel gossip affects us less than it would if its rumours always reached our ears, which they do not. Fortunately for him John Graves guessed nothing of what was said about his absent darling. And it was

well that he did not, having troubles enough of his own without that.

Among all those who called themselves his friends, only one perhaps truly sympathized with and pitied him—Charles Eden; and by degrees the two men, whose sorrow was in fact the same, were drawn closer together, and learnt to know and like each other. The Curate, overcoming his natural shyness, was the first to make every advance, and the sympathy only offered at first for Jane's sake, and in memory of his promise to her, soon became a real and living interest. The sight of the grave, grim face, with its settled look of brooding thought, made his heart ache, all the more so because of the image it never failed to conjure up, for the grey eyes were Jane's own eyes, less bright and eager it is true, but Jane's eyes still; and the features were hers, too, though ruder, and with nothing of her womanly sweetness of expression. Charles Eden's face was always good and gentle, but never was it so gentle as when he spoke to Jane's father, and finding that his advances met with no repulse, that when he called, the Doctor received and even seemed glad to see him, he came oftener to Woodford House than he had ever done before, and being a quiet, pleasant unobtrusive companion, who never said a word too much, who knew so well when to be silent and when to talk, his visits were always welcome.

Dr. Graves, who liked so few people, liked him, and found a certain comfort in his society; and so he wrote and told Jane, little dreaming

of the happiness his words would give, or how they would be read over and over again, until she had made of them a sacred memory.

Mr. Eden's dismissal from the curacy was not made public until the very last moment; the Rector keeping it close for reasons best known to himself; and the Curate himself being far too reserved and humble ever to bring his private concerns willingly under notice.

Another curacy in a distant county having been obtained, and the hour of departure having arrived, he paid his round of farewell visits, taking for what it was worth the general outcry of regret that assailed him on every side. "And he was really going; what a shame! what a pity! whoever would have thought it? and would there be a new curate? Upon this subject eager curiosity was manifested, but met with no satisfaction. And where was he going to now? Dear, dear! what a pity that he had not managed to get on better with the Rector. And what had the misunderstanding been about, after all?

Much curiosity, little real interest; the Curate winced, but forced himself to answer all their questions with gentle dignity. What right had he to feel hurt or wounded at their indifference or want of consideration for his feelings?

The visits were all paid, the last evening had come, and the fat landlady having cried herself hoarse, her throat dry, and eyes and nose red, now sat on the kitchen stairs, rocking herself despairingly to and fro, and wondering hazily

why every lodger wasn't a curate, who paid well, gave no trouble, and had a liking for children and *their ways*. What was comprehended under these two last words I leave it to the reader to imagine. It is a way authors have when conscious of the weakness of their own imaginative powers to cast the weight of responsibility upon those of the reader. I do so now.

Surrounded by the ragged uproarious fry, for whose ways the lodger was supposed to have a liking, and seated on the kitchen stairs just because it was the most uncomfortable seat she could have fixed upon, Mrs. Lumley moralized upon the vanity of all sublunary things—good things at least—for had she got hold of a bad lodger instead of a model one, he would have stayed on for ever—of that she felt quite sure. And I have no doubt whatever that she was right, for it is only the burrs that stick to you in the walk of life—not the roses and violets.

The landlady wept, but not so the one-eyed dragoness to whom had been entrusted the lodger's personal comfort, she even rather despised the fat landlady for her tears. She had lost a husband, three children, the sight of an eye, and the hearing of an ear—and worse even than all this, she had got into the workhouse. Those were things to cry for, but the loss of a lodger! Yes, Mrs. Grimage did certainly despise the fat landlady for her tears.

"It's all very well for you to talk so," sobbed the afflicted widow, as her fellow widow suggested her getting up and leaving the coast clear, repre-

sending to her the impossibility of her reaching the coal cellar so long as she sat there, except by a vault over her head which might prove fatal to both. "It's all very well for you to talk so, but you've got no feeling, and you don't lose nothing, you don't."

Mrs. Lumley meant that Mrs. Grimage *did* lose nothing; and there she was right again, for our dragoness had arranged everything in the manner most comfortable and satisfactory to herself, by insisting upon following the master to his new curacy, for, as she shrewdly observed, "It mightn't be just such an easy matter for him to find her like in a strange place."

Mrs. Grimage was too modest, for she might at once have affirmed on oath that her like would never again be found in any place, however strange! And to this conclusion Charles Eden had come from the moment he had first set eyes upon her. But that he should for this reason be called upon to accept her as personal and moveable property, was a conclusion to which he had certainly never come, and never would have come but for its being thus forced upon him. Had she been a degree less matchless he would unhesitatingly have declined the honour of her company, but being what she was, he only coughed nervously, put on his spectacles, and surveyed her thoughtfully from behind them.

Now, it was very seldom that he made use of his spectacles when looking at her, it being exactly at such times, and such times only, that he felt grateful to the short sight that so merci-

fully obscured his vision. But to-day in order to fortify himself in his good resolution, he did make use of them, and surveying her thoughtfully from behind them, said—"Oh yes—of course—certainly—why not?"

And so the matter was settled; and with a visage grim and inscrutable as fate itself, Mrs. Grimage stalked out of the room.

Lady readers, I have somewhat to say unto you. I have no doubt that many among you have very charming eyes—black, brown, blue, grey, or that delicious shade that the envious call green, and the admiring hazel—and that you make a very good use of those bright eyes I have no doubt either, but Mrs. Grimage may teach you and them a lesson. One eye always kept steadily fixed on the main chance is worth more than two, however bright, that are allowed to rove hither and thither, with no more profitable object than pleasing and being pleased. And yet—and yet—is the lesson necessary after all? Are not bright eyes always brightest when turned on the main chance? and are we not glad, right glad to find now and then a pair of innocent dewy eyes that look out upon the world with no more interested object than pleasing and being pleased?

The last evening had come, the last evening to be spent by the Curate in the dull dingy little rooms endeared to him by so many recollections—some sweet, some bitter, but all dearer to him than anything to which he could be going. Not caring to look round upon the dreary space

from whence all the household gods had disappeared—books and writing materials, pictures, and knick-knacks, nothing being left but the bare walls and the few shabby articles of furniture—he sat, his head drooped forward upon his hand, his eyes bent upon the table—feeling very strange and lonely and depressed.

Mrs. Grimage entered with the tea—his last tea there! and together with her entered Mistress Puss, no longer a kitten, but a grey, sleek, well-behaved cat; of whom the Curate was still as fond as ever—nay, more so perhaps, for he had christened her Jean, which was the greatest honour and proof of affection he could possibly have bestowed upon her.

The thought of Miss Jean, and her probable fate when he should be gone had long weighed heavy on his heart. The stout landlady in a private interview he had with her on the subject had, it is true, promised to befriend and be to it as a mother; but then she had seven children, more than half of whom were boys—and boys do delight in tormenting cats, and will to the end of time. And even if left in peace by the boys, who would protect her against the babies who would drag her about by the tail, as the way of babies is? Had Miss Graves been still at Beddington, the matter would have been easily settled; her namesake placed under her care, his mind would have been quite at ease as to her future welfare. But where was the use of thinking of what might have been? Miss Graves was far away, and in a few hours he would be far

away, too, and then—what would become of poor puss?

"Yes, Jean, we little know what a few hours may bring forth," he said, as she came running in, and jumping upon his lap, rubbed her soft head against his arm.

"She's so restless, this evening; there's no getting her to stay quiet anywhere," Mrs. Grimage remarked, in a stern, condemnatory tone; but there was a perceptible quiver in the one eye, that belied the severity of her words.

"Poor puss, she's a pretty soft creature, eh, Grimage?—it seems a pity to leave her behind, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Grimage did think it a pity, but then she took things more philosophically than her master. She only gave a grunt, which did very well either for assent or dissent, and filled a saucer with milk.

"Poor puss!" repeated the Curate once more.

For some time he had been watching her in thoughtful silence, as with curled-up body and close-shut eyes, the very picture of feline content, she lapped up the milk that, unaccompanied by contentment and inward peace of mind, might never again taste so sweet. "She'll miss her little comforts, I'm afraid. You see, she's been used to them ever since her"—he was going to say childhood, but caught himself up in time—"ever since her kittenhood, and will find it hard to do without them."

"Maybe she will."

"But it would never do to take her with us, eh?"

"Cats is cats, and is to be found everywhere," was the hard answer, not unmixed with contempt; but the regretful quiver was still in the eye.

"It's a fact well known in natural history that cats attach themselves to place rather than to people," proceeded the Curate, oracularly. He had read this when a very small boy, in his spelling-book, and had since heard small boys read it in theirs; so it had become indelibly imprinted upon his memory.

Poor puss seemed to feel the oppression of impending change, for she was very restless all the evening, and neither she nor her master slept much that night.

The next morning at an early hour, Charles Eden having bidden a tender adieu to his landlady, patted the woolly head of each child in succession, and left in each dirty little hand a bright new shilling—which touching proofs of his affectionate regard consigned the mother to the kitchen stairs for the remainder of the day—walked quietly to the station. He had started earlier than he need have done, for he wished once more to pass Woodford House. There was little enough to be seen there—the gardener in the garden, and the housemaid on the doorstep; but there is a certain satisfaction in looking one's last.

The station reached, and the train not yet in, he walked up and down the platform, feeling very lonely and disconsolate—thinking of Jane and Jean, of what he was leaving, and what he might be going to—and of many other

things besides which concern no one but himself.

A whistle—a shriek—the moment of departure had come.

It has been more than once alleged that the diseases of the brain now daily gaining ground in this our country, proceed from railway travelling.

But is this to be wondered at when people systematically lose their heads on a railway platform? How can any brain thus constantly weakened, resist a greater shock when it comes? People systematically lose their heads on a railway platform, and Charles Eden, being as we have before confessed, a very average commonplace young man, forming no exception whatever to any rule, it follows as a matter of course that he lost his with the rest—ay, head and nearly footing, too, for making a frantic rush forward, he stumbled over something that had got between his feet.

“I beg your pardon,” he stammered out confusedly, but politely too; for unlike some other men, he could lose head and footing, without at the same time losing temper.

And so after all we did him injustice in saying that he formed no exception to any rule.

When he had sufficiently calmed down his agitation to bring his spectacles to a level with his boots, he recognised in the stumbling-block that fate had thrown in his way Miss Jean herself; who, still between his feet, and rubbing herself gently against them, was arching her

back, and mewing up into his face in the most beseeching manner.

Amazed and incredulous, the Curate turned down upon her a queer look of puzzled inquiry, as if asking her how she had come there. Just then Mrs. Grimage came up.

"Puss is here."

"So I see."

What was to be expected from so grim an answer? There was a long pause; a troubled look in the Curate's eyes, then a sudden brightening up of them behind the spectacles.

"Do you happen to have a basket?"

Yes, Mrs. Grimage did happen to have a basket; nay, she happened to have four baskets, two of which she carried on her arms, while two more stood on the ground, one on either side of her; and over these latter she was mounting guard, with a fierceness and vigilance that few would have dared defy. To keep both in sight, when one only was visible at a time, required an almost superhuman activity; and her head kept moving incessantly from side to side with a motion as regular as the pendulum of a clock.

As her master uttered the magic word basket, she ran her eye once more hastily over them to make sure that they were really all there. One, two, three, four; yes, the number was complete; and she looked at them with all the more satisfaction for knowing that each of the four was so full that she had found it a moral impossibility to shut down the respective lids.

"To think of her having followed us all the way here—so far from home—a most remarkable case of animal instinct, and—what's to become of her now? If only she doesn't get under the train, that would be—so dreadful, you know."

The Curate would have felt very grateful to Mrs. Grimage for saying something—not caring to bear himself the whole weight of responsibility—but she said nothing.

The crowd jostling and pressing forward on every side, he took puss up into his arms, casting at the same time a longing look at the baskets. If only the Cerberus who guarded them were a less formidable monster—if only her eye would not blink so ominously, or—he had been endowed by nature with more moral courage.

"If we could but contrive to find a basket,—I think she would be glad to go with us, or she'd never have followed us here." Puss changed her mew to a purr, and nestled closer. "I think we might regret it afterwards if we were to leave her behind, and—— But what's the matter?"

He might well ask that, nor was it any wonder that he felt his hair rise up erect upon his head, for his nerves were not of the strongest, and the sight before him was an appalling one. With a strange gurgling in the throat that could but be the precursor of a fit of apoplexy or insanity, Mrs. Grimage had let the two baskets down upon the ground, and had let herself down along with them. From her kneeling posture she held up

her skinny hand for puss, and the Curate actually shuddered to see that the eye ominously fixed upon her had ceased to blink, and had lighted up with almost demoniac brilliance.

“Give it here, sir, I’ll make a parcel.”

“Of puss?” and the Curate felt the blood curdle in his veins.

“No, of my apron.”

And a parcel of her apron Mrs. Grimage made accordingly, pouring into it the contents of the smallest basket, which was soon empty, and being so, Miss Jean was popped into it, and the lid tied down loosely over her, making a better, closer fit than it had ever done before, at least since it had got into the widow’s possession.

Puss safely packed, what was to happen next? Of this our Curate was not long left in doubt, for exclaiming distractedly that the train was moving off, Mrs. Grimage caught up all her belongings, and made for a third-class carriage, leaving the master in sole charge of cat and basket.

That he felt his position to be an awkward one, and was far less comfortable in his mind than he would have been with empty hands or only his carpet bag to take care of, cannot be denied; he however made the best of a bad bargain, and contrived to be seated before the train started. But, alas, his embarrassments did not end here, for the compartment being full, and he far too well bred to put any fellow-passenger to inconvenience, he had to keep the basket poised upon the point of his knees, rendering his attitude

anything but a graceful one ; and when, all of a sudden, puss mewed, and two young ladies giggled, and a stout magisterial-looking elderly gentleman, upon whose corns he had trodden when getting in, surveyed him from over the edge of the *Times*, Jean's ill-starred protector turned hot and cold, and felt a most unpleasant prickly sensation about the roots of the hair.

By the time they had reached the first station, however, he had reasoned himself into stoical indifference—Diogenes in a tub—a grave bespectacled curate, with a cat in a basket. Was one more open to ridicule than the other? The damsels might laugh, and the elderly gentleman stare, their contempt would hurt him far less than the after thought of that poor little creature left behind, homeless and friendless. And as to that unpleasant prickly sensation about the roots of the hair—why, how many unpleasant sensations are we not doomed to bear without even the hope of after satisfaction?

It has been said hundreds of times, and will be said hundreds of times again, for it is a truth, and truth reproduces itself at every step, how little you know when going to a new place under what circumstances you will leave it. You start for it with a light heart and jaunty air, little dreaming of what vast importance to your life the change will prove. You enter the new city, and your eyes, the eyes of the dreamer and visionary, rise at once to its towers, its palaces, its monuments. You are ambitious, and feel confident of success! Calm your transports, and

let your eyes droop to the earth, or raise them higher still, above tower and monument, beyond the things of time. A home you will find in that city, yes, and a monument too—the tombstone that records a name that none will pause to read. You are ambitious, and at the outset dream only of the end, little thinking how near that end is. Or you, young man, with the deep-set eyes and resolute jaw, who walk the strange streets with so heavy a brow and so deliberate a step—not dreaming, you, but calculating—calculating the chances that a man with brains and a stout heart has of working his way up, step by step, inch by inch, by his own exertions—would not your brow clear and your step grow lighter, could you but see the future as it lies before you, could you but hear its voice in the merry pealing of the church bells; “Turn again, turn again, Lord Mayor of London?” But methinks you have a surer voice at your own heart; you have not that iron jaw and resolute brow for nothing. The great may fall, but the strong must rise—slowly and painfully it may be, but the struggle makes their victory all the greater. Whilst others dream, they work and win.

What has all this to do with the Curate and his cat? Whittington had a cat, and became Lord Mayor; but our Curate will never rise even to a bishopric; for, as we before said, he was a very commonplace average young man, of whom it would be cruel to expect great things; the foregoing homily, therefore, in no way regards

him. We were insensibly drawn away from our subject, and should have stopped short at the oft-repeated sentence. How little can we tell when arriving at a new place under what circumstances we shall leave it!

How little did Charles Eden think when nine months before he was set down on the Beddington platform, with free hands and a free heart, that he should leave it with a housekeeper, a cat, and a memory that was accompanying him to his new home, as surely as were the other two strange acquisitions.

CHAPTER XVII.

HODA had now been married some months ; how many she did not pause to calculate. What did it matter ? What did anything matter now ? She was Arden Graemes's wife, and with that thought every other ceased. His wife ! Yes, and a good one too ; a far better wife to him than she would have been to the man who had loved her so foolishly, who would have striven so hard to make her happy. One hour had taught her life's greatest, its sublimest lesson, the lesson of self-sacrifice. From the moment she had drawn the poor stricken head on to her woman's breast, she had done her duty by her husband. No one could have done it better ! She had nursed him unwearingly through the long and terrible illness that had followed his return home ; and the doctor had said that it was to her care and love he owed his life. Her care, yes—she had watched by him day and night, scarcely leaving him even for a moment, moistening his parched lips, smoothing his pillows, changing his bandages, chafing his death-cold hands and feet ; there was nothing, however menial, she did not do for him meekly and uncomplainingly. Her care, yes ; but her love ! What had either of them to do with that, now and for evermore ?

It had been a terrible time for her, that time of watching and anxiety. It was terrible to see him lying there senseless, gasping, agonizing. It was terrible afterwards, when consciousness, and by degrees partial strength returned, to see him wild and wan, pacing the room like some poor caged beast, and, indeed, he looked more like that than anything else, his tawny locks, wild as any mane, hanging matted and shaggy about his face and neck, adding so pitifully to his forlorn appearance; for the weak, doting mother had obstinately refused to have them shaved off, imploring Rhoda with tears not to let them rob her poor boy of the pretty golden curls she had once been so proud of. It was terrible to have him silent, with that fixed stare in the eyes, and that ceaseless quiver about the pale lips. It was more terrible to hear him speak. Awful things they were to which she was doomed to listen, awful, and so sad, so sad that she wept even whilst she shuddered. And when, the weakness of the frame reacting upon the mind, he would give way to the wildest bursts of terror and despair, and crouching down at her feet and burying his face in her dress, he would implore her not to leave him, as his mother said she would, but to stay by him always, always, to help and comfort him in the hour of darkness, though she shuddered again to see how low her idol had fallen, she did not curse him. He was both above and below her curses. No, she did not curse, she pitied. Had she loved him as she once fancied she did, or felt that he loved her, she would

have raised the stricken head from her feet to her breast, and tried to comfort him with the soft words and fond caresses that one true man's love had taught her to value only too highly; as it was, without kiss or caress she gave the required promise, and made of it a solemn vow to her own heart. She would never leave him, never go back to the old home and the old life which had been so happy; but stay by him always, always to help and comfort him in the hour of darkness, of which she only knew, and the mother whose place she was henceforth to take. With many bitter tears, with wild wringing of the hands and cries for help where help is alone to be obtained, the vow was made; but once made the struggle was over—the poor wayward heart was at rest.

She wrote to the old people a quiet humble letter, not sad or regretful—of what use was it to mourn over the irrevocable?—but sad and humble. She had acted wickedly, she said, and had no excuse to offer except that her marriage had been a sudden resolution. People would tell them that she had acted throughout with systematic deception; but that was not true, and they must not believe it. One day, perhaps, she would explain all, but not yet—not yet. Not a word of blame did she cast upon her husband, who had been very ill, she said, and she had had to nurse him or she would have written before. She could give no address, as they would be going from place to place.

Six such letters were written, then torn to

pieces, with a certain despairing passion. Why did the tears that had not eased her heart in all its agony come choking and blinding her now, blistering and blotting the paper, and rendering the trembling characters almost illegible? Of what avail was it that she tried to write calmly and cheerfully, when the blotted, tear-stained scrawl betrayed her? One struggle more—the tears must be driven back, drunk up by the thirsting heart that had once longed for the relief of tears in vain. One night, when Arden Graemes slept, heavily, after a day of more than usual excitement, she drew the table to his bedside, and there she wrote her letter home. With that pale, wild face before her, she could not weep.

Had Rhoda's marriage been indeed what she had thought it would be, a brilliant and enviable one, this, her first letter home, would have been far more loving and penitent. She would have spoken more of her grief at the sorrow and shame she had brought upon them, she would have implored the pardon without which she could not be happy, and a sight of the dear faces that sorrow and repentance had made dearer to her than ever. But her future being what it was, with that awful secret which might never be told even to them, added to its burden of shame and fear, to speak of anything like hope either for herself or them would be but a cruel mockery from which her whole soul revolted. She neither spoke of pardon nor of a future meeting, not a word of the new love for which she had sacrificed the old—not a word. She did not even ask for an

answer, and none could be sent, for there was no address.

Poor father ! poor mother ! There are sorrows that bow the frame and turn the hair white, and shrivel up the heart until life becomes a living death. Is not your sorrow such a one as this ? As soon as Arden was sufficiently recovered to get about again, he insisted upon returning to the wandering life that was the only one possible for him. "There's no keeping him in when once the fit's upon him," his mother said, and she looked anxiously into the young wife's face. But Rhoda did not wish to keep him in—why should she ? She did not even ask him where he was taking her. All places were the same. And as she said this she sighed, and so did the poor mother, who for years had borne the burden that fate had now laid upon *her*.

"Wherever he goes I will follow him, asking no question." And so she did from place to place, ministering to him, and bearing with him—God knows how patiently !—for the devotion that is born of pity is far more perfect than that born of love, love having always something of cruelty in its very excess.

Rhoda had now been married some months, months that might as well have been years, so wearily had they dragged along. During these few months she had seen more new places than she had ever before dreamt of in her life, and in each and all of these places Arden had preached, for he was now more than ever engrossed in his work. And the papers wrote of him, and the

world talked of and ran after him, gaping, wondering, applauding; and Rhoda followed and ministered to him in meekness and silence and patience.

He had just preached in a populous town, which was in a perfect uproar of excitement, and returning home, faint and exhausted, he told Rhoda that they must be off that evening, that they might reach a distant town where work awaited him early in the morning. She did not dispute his will. At first she had sometimes tried to do so; she had tried to take care of him, to keep him more at home, to prevent him wearing himself out when he was still so delicate. But every such attempt had only served to excite him almost to frenzy. So she had given it up long ago, and now she only followed him according to her promise, asking no questions.

They travelled all night, Rhoda crouching in the furthest corner of the railway carriage. To-night, if sleep came she would give way to it. It was not always she could do so. It was too often at night that the disordered mind, relieved from the stern restraint of the day, gave way to its unhallowed ravings; but to-night Arden Graemes was quiet. He did not sleep, but he was quiet, looking out upon the still, starry night, his great eyes lifted upward, the pale lips murmuring softly. Holy, beautiful words they murmured, wild only in their poetic dreaminess. Yes, Rhoda might sleep in peace to-night.

She felt the weary limbs quiver and stiffen; the weary lids drop heavier and heavier over the

burning eyeballs. A start, a flutter, a thrill of utter weariness, and she had sunk into a heavy sleep. And the flying train and hours sped on, and the blue eyes kept their rapt, upward gaze, and the pale lips their holy breathings, and the woman, whose one happiness now was rest, slept on and dreamt.

She was sleeping still and dreaming, when the train stopped. The door by which she was sitting opened with a bang, and this, together with the rush of cold air, awoke her with a start and shiver.

"Change here for Rockwood."

She was wide awake now, and touched her husband lightly on the shoulder. "We must change here for Rockwood."

He was longer awaking from his abstraction than she had been from her dreams. "Change," he repeated, musingly; "yes, yes, it will come, it will come surely, but not yet, not yet."

"An hour and a half to wait," added the guard as he passed on to another carriage.

It was no longer night now, a grey early dawn was streaking the sky, and far away to the west dull reddish clouds were floating. The sun could not be very far from its rising.

A keen biting wind was blowing from end to end of the exposed platform. Arden coughed the deep hollow cough that made all those who heard it pale and shiver, but of which he himself was scarce conscious.

"Let us go into the waiting-room; it will be less cold there."

Rhoda took his hand as she would have done that of a little child, and led him in. Yes, it was less cold there, as she had said.

Had Rhoda looked about her as she took her seat in the farthest corner of the large bare room she would surely have been struck by the familiar aspect of things around; but just then she was busy watching Arden's face, that pale illumined face, so like the old picture of St. Stephen that she had once seen and thought so beautiful. Very often did she watch it, never with pride or pleasure or love, sometimes with fear, always with pity.

Two men, a porter and comfortable looking burgher, were standing together at the door.

"Well, I thought as how for sure he'd have come by this train; they expected him down this morning, and the old lady was here herself, and a pretty fuss she was in."

"What old lady?" asked the burgher, who had evidently paid little attention to the other's words.

"Why, Mrs. Randolph, to be sure."

Rhoda started up, clasping her hands, then raising them to either side of her head as if struck by a sudden pain there. She saw it all now—the familiar room, the familiar forms, she saw it all! Springing to her husband's side, she shook him almost roughly by the arm.

"Do you know where we are?"

He looked up at her with a dreamy, far-off gaze.

"Do I know where we are? Yes, yes, I

know. God has shown it me. Not so far from the end, one day farther, one day nearer, for it is day now, and twenty-four hours are given unto men in which to work, and then comes the night."

"I wont stay here," she hissed through her set teeth; "do you hear, I wont! "You've brought me home—to Woollingford. He may be here at any moment and recognise me. I wont be recognised by him; anything else, anything else but that!"

It was not the humble wife who gave way to that passionate heart-broken cry, but the old Rhoda of the old lost days; when the eager wayward heart could speak out its every feeling, good or bad. Recognised by him! would even the lover eyes have recognised in the shabbily-dressed woman, travel-stained, sallow, hollow-eyed, the thick veil screening her features, and a great coarse plaid wrapped about her thin shivering form, the belle of Woollingford, famous for her good looks, fine dress, and the fine airs she gave herself?

"Let us go; quick, quick!" She did not wait for an answer, but seizing his hand almost dragged him along, never pausing even for breath until they stood in the lane, the pretty lane that was always so pleasant in summer, and along which her flying steps had so often passed in the old lost days.

For some time they walked on in silence, she shivering and moaning to herself as if in pain.

"Did you know that you were bringing me here?" she asked at last, her heart for the first time for many a weary day rising up in fierce rebellion against her fate. "Did you know it?"

Struck, perhaps, by the unnatural hardness of her tone, Arden looked wistfully into her face.

"Time and place are not in my hand, Rhoda, but in the hand of Him whose instrument I am. He says to me in the night, go there, and I go. It was He who brought us here."

He spoke with gentle solemnity, and the music of his voice fell with soothing power upon her rebellious storm-tossed heart, freezing it once more to calm and silence.

"He brought us here!" repeated Arden, then his gaze dropped away from her face, and he resumed his walk, muttering, half aloud, "Yes, yes, this is her home! She had a home once, and so had I; but we have no home now. He had none either. Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head. And yet the head is so weary at times—so weary—so weary."

And lower and lower upon the breast that sorrow and disease had already shrunk and hollowed, sank the pale saintly head that, as he said, often felt so weary.

They had now reached the end of the lane, and not many steps further on lay Rhoda's home—the dear old home! She stopped short, trembling violently, and half stretched out her arms towards it, then clasped them over her head, crushing down in them the face all quivering with long suppressed agony. A longing had seized her, wild, despairing, rapturous, to visit it once more, if but for a moment; to kneel on the threshold, not to weep there or pray, but

only to kneel ! No one would see her ; the old people would be asleep still, nurse too. She must go—she must !

She told Arden so, steadying her shaking voice and limbs, speaking calmly and resolutely. Had she met with opposition she would have turned upon him with all the fierceness of despair ; but he did not oppose her, he only pointed to a wood at the further end of the lane. “ We will meet there.”

He left her and walked slowly away. She watched him out of sight ; then, with a wild, sudden bound she had cleared the road, and the old home stood before her.

Was it no dream, no phantom of the brain ? Was it her home in very truth ? Yes, yes ; there was the garden and the white stone porch, and the many windows gleaming blindly forth in the pale early light. The windows of her parents’ room, of the room, too, where she had sat and dreamt so many foolish, wicked dreams. Yes, it was her home ; and having reached its threshold she knelt down upon it, her forehead to the cold stone.

There nurse Freeman, coming to open the street door, found her.

“ Miss Rhoda ! ”

The haggard face was raised just a little, the clasped hands being still pressed down upon the ground.

“ Miss Rhoda ! ”

Well might the cry of surprise turn to one of awe ! Well might the woman doubt whether it

were not her young mistress's ghost rather than she herself that knelt before her; for how could she ever have pictured the gay young creature as she saw her now?

"Hush, nurse, hush!"

She had risen slowly and painfully, and now stood before her, grey and spectral in the grey spectral light.

One more startled look, a muttered exclamation, and nurse turned. Too well did Rhoda know what she was about to do—to wake the old people with the cry, Miss Rhoda's come!

But it was not for them she had come. A few more flying steps and she would be at their feet, in their arms—see them, kiss them, implore their pardon, obtain their blessing—but it was not for them she had come—not for them! And so she told nurse, detaining her with wildly clinging fingers and the mute supplication of her eyes.

"Let me go, Miss Rhoda; the loss of you nearly broke their hearts."

"Oh no, nurse, I can't, I can't! it would kill me and them."

"No, Miss Rhoda dear, it would make them so happy!"

"Happy! to see me. Has it made you happy?"

Nurse groaned. "And they think of you as a fine lady, too fine and too grand to notice them simple country folk."

"Let them think it, nurse—that or anything else but what I really am."

She realized their love at last, the great love that could better bear to think her proud than unhappy.

"No, I couldn't see them," she went on, in the half-coaxing, half-impetuous tone that had always got her her own way, however wilful that way might be. "I couldn't, nurse; don't ask me! And I've so short a time to stay—a few minutes—and I must join him, my husband, in the wood. I couldn't keep him waiting, you know. I didn't come on purpose. I would never have done that; but when I was so near, so near, I couldn't help the longing that seized me to see it just once more."

"And you'll go away without so much as seeing them," interrupted nurse, half choked with grief and indignation.

"If I were to see them it would kill me; I tell you it would kill me!" repeated Rhoda, with a wild desolateness of passion that made the old woman shudder, and prevented her pressing the point any further.

A long pause, then the scarce audible question, "Is anything changed, nurse—in the house I mean?"

"There's nothing changed; it's all just as you left it. The master would have it so."

"Nurse, I must see it; I must see it just once more!"

"What, Miss Rhoda?"

"My room. I shan't be gone a minute, and you'll stay here and keep watch, eh, nurse?"

Without waiting for an answer she sped up

the stairs. On the landing she paused, as if irresolute. There were two rooms. It was at the first she had stopped, bending forward her head in a listening attitude. All was still. There was nothing to fear, nothing to hope for. They had not heard her stealing footsteps; they could not hear the beating of her heart, the painful throbbing of every nerve in her frame—they did not know that she stood without in shame, despair, and fear. Noiselessly as before, she passed on to the other door, and opened it. All was still there too, still, and cold, and solemn, dimly lighted as it was by the sickly dawn that came struggling in through the lowered blinds. And that had once been her room, and the summer sunshine had flooded it from end to end, and in it she had laughed, and sung, and dreamt, and been happy. Poor Rhoda! No wonder that on entering it now she felt the same creeping sensation of awe we feel on entering the immediate presence of the dead. And was not the old self dead indeed, and she who now stood trembling and shivering on the threshold but as a wandering spirit revisiting once more the scene of former happiness? Happiness! O God! how could she ever have been so happy and so unthankful!

What was it that was rising from her heart to her throat, making it throb and quiver—choking, blinding, maddening her? Was she going to give way at last—and there! Would the old people be awakened from their sleep by her sobs and tears and wild calls after the

old lost happiness? Oh no! no! A gasp, a strangled sob, and another victory had been gained. Well done, Rhoda! If there are sorrows that make of us martyrs, do they not make of us saints too? Well done!

"Nothing changed," she murmured half aloud, and she drew softly back the curtains of the bed, and for a moment laid her head down upon the fair white pillows. Would her rest ever again be as sweet as it had been there?

From the bed she went to the writing-table—all unchanged there too—all as she had arranged it for the short absence from which there was to be no return. Lingeringly she passed her hand over each familiar object—lingeringly and reverently too, for with each was connected some tender memory that sorrow had consecrated to itself. Two objects alone the wandering fingers did not touch—the photographs of an elderly gentleman and lady smiling out upon her from their gay gilt frames. Not good photographs, certainly, stiff, and awkward, and old-fashioned; and mercilessly had Rhoda Hayes once quizzed them; but now as the shrinking hand drew back as if its very touch were profanation, she knelt down and bent her face upon the table as if in prayer. When she rose up she did not look at them again—she could not. On the window-sill stood a little plant, it was one that Frank had given her on her last birthday, blushing furiously as he met her sly mischievous glance, and stammering out confusedly that it was "mother sent it."

And then she had laughed again, both at the gift and giver. Why not? She had other flowers in those days, and lovers too, enough of both; yet she had cherished the little plant, and prized it above the rest for all that. Who cherished it now? There were no blossoms yet, and the leaves were scant and drooping: but it was not dead—a fit emblem of the true love that can never die. Instinctively the poor thin fingers closed about it, and hugging it to her bosom she hid it away beneath her shawl. That was the only thing she carried away with her.

Passing that other door on her way down, she paused once more. All quiet still—all safe she could go on her way. No fear of discovery now—no fear of the wild retaining clasp of the mother arms—no fear—no hope! She could go on her way.

Oh, father! mother! Her hand groping blindly out sought the handle of the door, and dropped down upon it. But she stood just opposite the passage window, and from it she could see the wood where Arden was waiting for her. If she once felt the clasp of the mother arms about her she must tell them all, and she would be lost to Arden for ever. In weakness and weariness he would have to work on alone, with no one to comfort or to pity him as she did. She who alone out of all those who worshipped him as a god knew him as he really was. Poor, wild, broken-hearted Arden! who had

suffered so much, and made her suffer so much too !

Her hand dropped from the door, and the straining eyes, still fixed upon the distant wood where he was waiting for her, filled.

At the foot of the stairs she found nurse Freeman, who had not dared to move, scarcely even to breathe, ever since she left.

"Oh, Miss Rhoda dear, Miss Rhoda," and seizing her hand she burst out into sobs and tears. "Don't go away now you've come. Stay with us. He'll never dare to come and fetch you away, the bad wicked man."

"No, no !" interrupted the young wife hurriedly, the red flush of shame dyeing the pale cheek ; "he is not wicked, he is good, very good. You know nothing ; you can know nothing. You must never say that again."

"Well, good or bad, he stole you from us, who loved you better than he does, or you'd never look as you do. Don't go, missy, dear, don't. Stay with us, and it'll be all right ; you'll see it will."

"All right !" Could it ever again be all right with her ? Oh, if it could ! if it could ! To stay seemed so easy, to go so hard—quite impossible but for the thought of the man who had so cruelly wronged her, the husband who in calm undoubting trust was waiting for her out there in the wood.

Passing her hand over her parched lips, she told nurse that she could not stay, that it was quite impossible—quite. If she could she would,

oh yes, she would, but it was impossible. And nurse looking into her face, the still, white, resolute face, felt that what she said was true.

"I've still very far to go, nurse, and I'm so thirsty."

Nurse went down into the kitchen to fetch a glass of water, Rhoda following her mechanically.

"Wont Martha be coming in?"

"She's ill in bed, poor thing; no one will be coming in, dear."

"I'm so tired," Rhoda said, "and so cold."

Nurse drew a wooden chair to the fire.

"Sit down, missy, and warm yourself a bit."

Rhoda shook her head. "If you'll sit down and let me put my head in your lap as I used to do, before I went away and made you all so unhappy. I think it would do me good."

Nurse had always been the spoilt young mistress's, willing slave, and she now sank down into the chair, covering her face with her hands. And Rhoda, crouching down at her feet, buried her face in the old woman's lap, and as with a long, long shudder, almost of ecstasy, she felt the warm fire-glow penetrate the frozen veins, and upon the dulled ear broke old familiar sounds, faint and uncertain because of the stupor that was upon her, the ticking of the great Dutch clock, the purring of the cat from the corner, the rattling of the milk carts along the road—the thought came to her how sweet it would be to die so, in the old home with nothing to fear, not even the clasp of father's and mother's arms about her, for her secret would be dead too with

her. But what would Arden do without her—poor mad Arden!

The devotion that springs from pity is stronger than love, stronger even than despair. She rose from the ground slowly and painfully, smoothed back the hair from her face, drew down her veil, and lifting up the little plant once more, hid it beneath her shawl.

"I shall be so glad of it, nurse, you know," she said, with a faint smile.

"Oh, Miss Rhoda, Miss Rhoda, whatever will poor master and mistress say?"

"Never mind that now. You must never tell them I was here—you couldn't—it would be so cruel."

"Yes, it would be cruel," repeated nurse Freeman, as she stood at the door, and through her blinding tears watched her young mistress cross the road and disappear. "It would be cruel." And she wrung her hands, dimly conscious of a sorrow greater, more irreparable than any of which she or the poor old people upstairs had ever dreamt.

Rhoda found her husband awaiting her at the appointed place, pacing the path from end to end, muttering and gesticulating with tossing arms and looks so wild—so mad. She stole up softly to his side, and touched him on the shoulder.

"I am ready, dear."

"Ready—yes, Rhoda, so am I! Don't you see how the shadows of the night flee from the face of day and the darkness now lies behind us, so that we need not see it or be tormented by it

any more, if we will but keep steadily onward without a backward look into the past. And why should we look back? We are not the children of the past, but of the future; eternity has no past, and we are the children of eternity; every glance turned backward drops sorrow-weighted to the earth, for all our memories lie there, whilst every look sent onward rises to heaven, for there lie all our hopes!"

They had now left the wood and stood on a little rise. Rhoda turned and lifted her veil. The old home was still in sight, lying there so peaceful and solemn in the grey morning mist. There was a mist before her eyes too, but she cleared it away. Nothing must come between her and that last look.

"You are right, dear; there must be no looking back now; to some lives there must be no past."

She had dropped her veil, and turning back to her husband, slowly descended with him the hill.

"Give me your hand, Rhoda."

She was hugging the precious flower, both hands tight folded about it, but she released one by pressing the plant yet closer to her bosom, and gave it him.

And so, hand in hand they passed on into the road, and from thence into the lane; the man, and the woman he called wife. And the sun rose, and the mist cleared, and the old people still slept on and dreamt, and never for a moment doubted that the shadow of their lost child had crossed their threshold.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOW Jane and Mildred had been three months at Badestone, and to the former, at least, the time had seemed an eternity. She, who at home had found the day so much too short to get into it all the day's work, now found the hours hang so heavy on her hands that she began to think if things went on at this rate, she should ere long be seized with the uncomfortable delusion that she had already attained the age of Methuselah, and was bearing the burden of his years without at the same time inspiring the respect accorded to so rare a specimen of antiquity.

To Mildred the time had not seemed so long; no, certainly not; and yet, had you asked her how long it was since she had left Beddington, she would have been puzzled to give an answer; for she had quite an original way of calculating time, not at all by the calendar, but by certain feelings and impressions constituting her life—walks and talks—sunsets in the sky, storm and moonlight on the waters. The first scent of the violet in the wood—the first evening spent in Rockstone garden—that wonderful spring evening, when she had sat on the bench beneath the great elm-tree and watched the shadows fall,

lower and lower ; nearer and nearer, until the whole was shadow only. And then she no longer watched, but listened to the distant murmur of the sea ; the last note of the birds in the trees overhead ; the whisper of the air among the branches, until song and whisper ceased altogether, and she no longer listened, but sat on and dreamt, whilst the distant murmur of the sea mingled unconsciously with her dreams. And by-and-by there had come the sharp ring of a horse's hoofs along the rocky ground. Yes, that was a wonderful, wonderful evening ! And so Mildred computed time.

That from the Rockstone garden dated very many of the events in her calendar is natural enough, seeing she spent so much of her time there.

We have before said that it was impossible for any one to have much to do with Mildred Graves without growing fond of her. Mrs. MacCullan had grown fond of her almost unconsciously—a careless, lukewarm interest in a child of seventeen, being in her estimation a matter of too little importance for it to be worth the owing to herself, much less to any one else. It was such a much easier thing to like than dislike her, poor little thing. She was such a pretty, soft creature—so graceful, so unobtrusive, so light of tread, so sweet of voice. What objection could possibly be made to her ?

This was all Mrs. MacCullan said in praise of her young relative, and her manner was still the reverse of affectionate ; but she was quite willing

to have the girls with her, and had not yet repented her of the natural impulse that had led her to own the relationship.

Perhaps, woman of the world as she was, or had been, she found it hard to have to do so entirely without the adulation to which she had been so long accustomed, and found it pleasant to read something of the old feeling in the strange wild eyes of the girl who had craved and gained permission to call her aunt.

"I can't think what Mildred sees to like in her so much," Jane wrote to the Doctor. "I find her anything but a lovable or attractive person, and she doesn't make half the fuss about her that poor Mrs. Reeves did."

"I can't understand why you care for her or what she says?" Jane said one day to Mildred, whom she found quite sad and thoughtful, pondering over a remark that Mrs. MacCullan had made, and which she (Jane) had resented as an impertinence.

"You don't understand? No, of course not, but mamma would. She is glad that I know and love aunt Frances, I'm sure she is."

After this Jane understood things better, and she never again felt angry and jealous as she had before been tempted to do when she saw Mildred go nestling up to the cold proud woman who took so little notice of her.

They had been three months at Badestone, and during that time nothing of any great importance had occurred, except a visit from Dr. Graves, who, busy though he was, his one efficient

assistant having left him to set up for himself, had contrived to run down for a few days, and how happy had those few days been! Neither of the girls could make enough of him; but Mildred, how she hung about him, and kissed and fondled him, and held him by the hand so tight—so tight, or, when she could not do that, how she followed him, close as his shadow, not to lose, as she said, one moment of those few happy days. Then she took him to all her favourite haunts, and whispered softly as they sat together, her head upon his shoulder, “Here I sat and thought of you, dear, and of Woodford. How beautiful it must be there now—the garden and the wood, and the lanes.”

The Doctor did not say what he had sworn to himself should not be said. When she wished to go home she would tell him, until then he dared not speak of a return.

A coaxing look and word, for she was a dreadfully spoilt child, as we have before seen, and she got papa to call upon Mrs. MacCullan, which he had no intention whatever of doing, remembering a certain letter of hers that had made his wife Mildred cry so bitterly at the time of their marriage. But his child Mildred wished it, and her will was law. So he went, and sat for half-an-hour grim and stiff, his stiffness even exceeding that of his hostess, which is saying much. And between them sat Mildred all smiles and dimples, appealing first to one and then to the other, saying soft foolish things that made them smile in spite of themselves, and drew them

irresistibly nearer. Stephen was there, too, having lounged in some time after the visitors, and being formally and proudly introduced both by name and profession, all the more proudly because Mrs. MacCullan could not forget certain contemptuous epithets she had flung out many years before at that same profession to which the last of the MacCullans now belonged.

The introduction over, Stephen, evidently in no talking mood, went and sat down apart, not entering at all into the conversation, and only looking up every now and then, yet making himself quite master of all that was going on notwithstanding.

Constantly his mother's eyes sought his face, sometimes too those of the Doctor, but Mildred's never. When raised, they sought no face but that hard rugged one, that to others seemed so unattractive—not even a wandering sidelong glance had she for any one else.

By-and-by Stephen rose, said he must be going, and unceremoniously left the visitors to his mother. In the hall he found his hat and gloves, and whistling Woolfert to his side, they set off together for their evening stroll.

“Not one of them is worth staying at home for, eh, old fellow?”

Not a very civil speech, yet Woolfert did not seem shocked; perhaps he was accustomed to his master's strange moods; perhaps he thought that the laugh accompanying the words in a measure redeemed them. Anyhow, he would be discreet, and tell no tales.

"I like Dr. Graves," Mrs. MacCullan said later on in the evening to her son. "And how that child Mildred dotes on him, to be sure. Did you see how she hung about him, and how eager and radiant she was?"

As Stephen made no answer, she supposed he had not, and dropped the subject.

"I like your father," Mrs. MacCullan said to the girls, meeting them some days after. "I judge him to be a good and earnest man."

Jane half resented the patronizing tone in which this was said, but Mildred flushed and glowed, and seemed quite pleased and grateful for the careless praise.

The Doctor stayed some days longer than he had at first proposed, and then left. Mildred insisted upon their all accompanying him to Ryde.

"That I may keep you a few more hours, dear, you know," she said, hugging the big strong hand up against her breast, and whispering so softly—so softly; and as she smiled to think of the few hours gained, he sighed at the thought of the long separation that lay beyond them.

Never was there a lovelier May-day; never was there a pleasanter morning for a drive. It was a day to make any one gay certainly, yet Jane wondered how Mildred could look so bright, and talk so gaily, and seem so utterly forgetful of the past, so utterly careless of the future.

On the road they passed Stephen MacCullan riding along at a leisurely pace, evidently enjoying the beauty of the day and his own thoughts.

He raised his hat as they passed, and the sunlight fell bright and warm on horse and rider: on the stalwart form and brown curling hair.

"He's a fine fellow, a remarkably fine fellow," said the Doctor, looking after him admiringly. "No wonder his mother's so proud of him. A worthy representative of the MacCullan family, who were a very fine race—not delicate of feature, not one of them, except your mother, but a fine race nevertheless!"

"And he's so good and clever," added Jane, warmly. For, like most people, she liked the young doctor who had saved Mildred's life, better than most.

Mildred said nothing, but she stooped and kissed the hand she held so tightly in both hers, and after that she spoke less, and did not laugh at all.

As they stood on the Ryde boat waiting for it to start, and delaying to the last the moment of parting, Mildred, who was hanging on the Doctor's arm, her hands both clasped about it, whispered him something fond and regretful that brought to his lips the words that he had sworn to himself should not be spoken, "When will you ask me to take you home?"

He had tried to speak playfully, but he was too much in earnest to be able altogether to command his voice. He had tried not to startle her, but she was startled. Her hands dropped away from his arm, and she shrank from him with a look so pale and scared that he would have given worlds to have recalled the involuntary

remark. It was the first time that any allusion had been made between them to the one ill-fated subject. He hastened to change the conversation, but the wild, scared look still lay upon her face when the boat started.

The drive home was a silent one; Mildred did not even look at the country around, or at the sea, of which they caught a sight every now and then flashing and glittering beyond. What were her thoughts she could hardly herself have said, for they flitted hither and thither, not daring to rest long anywhere for fear of some painful memory being awakened. Sometimes, try as she might, she could not forget, and then she wondered self-pitying why she could not.

Jane's thoughts were sad too, but simple and straightforward as was her whole character. "She was so sorry for poor papa, so sorry for Mildred, so sorry for herself."

Doctor Graves had mentioned to her the fact of Charles Eden's departure from Beddington as a thing he himself regretted, but for which he thought she would care but little; and reasoning the matter over, she felt half angry with herself for caring so much. What chance was there of anything changing? Mildred's secret must die with her, and Charles Eden was not the man to unsay what he had once said "that so long as an unshared trouble parted them, they could be nothing to each other." No; they could not be anything to each other henceforth for ever; and yet in the first moment of surprise and pain she had been tempted to blame him,

to suspect the truth she had hitherto believed as in her own, to accuse him of deceit, to doubt the love that had been avowed and then withdrawn, to attribute his easy surrender of her, not to the noble motives that had appeared to actuate him, but to indifference, and the wish to make the separation of which he must even then have been aware easier to both. Why had he not told her that he was leaving Beddington?

Thinking all this over, her heart swelled and her eyes filled with angry tears, but she did not allow them to fall; with a great effort she gulped them back, and after a fierce but brief struggle she was her own honest right-judging good little self once more. Why should she doubt him? She had known him good, and she would believe him so until she had proofs to the contrary. It had been sad enough to lose him, it would be ten times sadder to doubt him. Perhaps it had all been arranged for the best, he would say so were he there. And trying to reason as he would reason, every trial seemed somehow lighter to bear. The thought of him would henceforth be more of a memory and less of a reality than ever. She might never even see him again, but she would not doubt him, come what might—she would never doubt him again.

Having once resolutely passed out of her own dark shadow—for, after all, how many of the troubles that beset our path at which we kick and repine, are but the shadow we ourselves have cast—the rest was easy. During that

silent drive home she thought much of Charles Eden, but with no bitterness, and seeing Mildred look pale and depressed, she reproached herself for having forgotten her even for that short hour ; so putting on the brightest of her looks as they reached the cottage, and actually laughing as she jumped out of the carriage, and stretched her cramped limbs, she proposed their running down to the sea just to take a peep at it whilst Mrs. Morton made the tea. But Mildred shook her head despondingly, and at once entered the house.

At tea Mrs. Morton, as she deemed herself in duty bound on the rather mournful occasion of the father's departure, tried to enliven her young charges by reminiscences of the old happy days at Woodford House, dwelling upon the Doctor's goodness, his indulgence, his love of Mildred ; how he would come and see her the last thing at night ; how his first call on his return home was for her ; how he would laugh at her sallies, and so on—and so on, until Mildred stopped her with a piteous look and a plaintive, " Oh, please don't ! If you had really been so very happy then, you could not bear to speak of it now."

" My dear !"

Mrs. Morton was horrified at the idea of any doubt being thrown upon her happiness at Woodford.

" No, you wouldn't speak so, you couldn't," persisted Mildred. " You never speak of the time when you were so happy in the pretty

little London rooms, with your husband and baby."

No, Mrs. Morton never spoke of those days. Mildred was right, she couldn't. Even the allusion to them was almost more than she could bear, and it silenced her effectually.

Tea over, Mildred went and sat down in the front garden. There was a larger one at the back, a prettier one too, commanding a glorious view over rock and sea, and there she generally sat. But to-day she cared for neither sea nor rock. They could not make her forget or undo the past, or comfort her, or poor papa either. So she went as far away as possible out of sight and sound of them, and dropping into the first bench she came to, she laid her arms down upon the rough wooden table that stood before it, and bent her face upon them, and so she sat for nearly an hour.

Now, it so happened that at the end of that time, a gentleman chanced to pass—a gentleman with a great wolf-hound at his side, and a cigar between his lips. Being tall enough to look over the garden hedge in passing, he did so, and saw where Mildred sat beneath the chestnut-tree, her face in her hands. That the attitude of the little figure was pitifully suggestive cannot be denied. He stopped short, and whistled softly to himself, "Ah, I see! yes, of course! poor little thing! I see!"

And seeing, the most natural thing for him to do was certainly to pass on his way; but

instead of that he deliberately opened the gate and entered.

"Good evening, Miss Mildred."

He never called her by her Christian name, spite of their avowed cousinship; firstly, because he had inherited something of his mother's proud reserve; secondly, because he was not the man to take advantage of anything, even his cousinship, when having to do with such a pretty girl as Mildred Graves.

He had to repeat the good-evening before it met with any response, but the response when it came was very soft, and the face abruptly lifted was dyed with blushes that came and went. He could see, too, how her bosom rose and fell with every quick, short gasp of her breathing.

"I hope I did not startle you."

"Yes, you did."

"I beg your pardon, but I come with a message from my mother, which I promised to deliver if I chanced to catch sight of you or Miss Graves in my evening walk; and catching sight of you, I felt in honour bound to keep my promise. Will you spend to-morrow evening with her?"

"I will decide to-morrow."

"Why not to-day?"—with a puzzled smile.

"Because to-morrow I shall not feel as I do to-day, and what I couldn't bear now will give me pleasure then."

"Are you so very capricious?"

This was said playfully, but there was a certain ring of earnestness in the tone.

She did not answer the question, she did not even seem to have heard it. With one small soft finger she was tracing mystic characters on the table, the other supported her cheek. Wondrously pretty she looked, with something wild and elfinlike about her too, with her white, wandering fingers, still small face, and the hair that the evening breeze had so long been allowed to play with, tumbling bright and loose over the low forehead which it almost completely hid. Wondrously pretty she looked, but paler than he had ever before seen her, and with a tremulous quiver about the lips telling of troubled thought.

Waiting for an answer he stood on the opposite side of the table looking down upon her.

Now, some men might have found the contemplation of that sweet innocent face rather a dangerous thing—that sweet woman's face, so strangely unconscious of its own power both for good and evil. But it was less its beauty that struck Stephen at that moment than its pitifulness. Had he found her indulging in a good cry because papa was gone, he would have felt far less sorry for her than he did now.

As she altogether ignored his question, and he was resolved upon getting an answer, he repeated it with an addition.

"Are you so capricious that you change your feelings every day?"

"A real deep feeling can never change because it's an emotion of the soul, and nothing that belongs to the soul can be lost. With physical

feeling it's very different, I think. When the sun shines and all looks bright and gay you feel gay too, unless you've some real, soulfelt trouble, and that nothing can change. And when the rain falls and all looks cold and dull, you feel cold and dull too, unless you've some great real joy, and that nothing can change."

Stephen bent on her a queer puzzled look. She often puzzled him, did Mildred Graves, and sometimes half vexed him with her strange words and ways. To his clear practical mind few things were dark, there were few things or persons he could not understand, but he could not understand her quite. Something in her nature there was that he could not grasp, and which therefore tantalized and at times even angered him. She was a pretty, soft creature, but she was something above and beyond all this. He said to himself that she would be sweeter and more attractive if really only just what his fancy tried to believe her, and nothing more; that by being something more she lost half her charm. Gladly would he have dismissed the thought of her as he did most things in life with a careless shrug of the broad shoulders, and the conviction that she was quite like every one else, nothing more or less, better or worse. And finding it impossible to dismiss her thus summarily, he hardly knew whether to feel most vexed with himself or her.

"Young ladies in general like to talk about feeling, I know," he said jestingly, and with a

short, unpleasant laugh, which seemed to throw contempt upon her words.

In a moment the wee fingers ceased their idle wanderings over the table, and striking her hands together sharply, Mildred looked up at him with eyes full of an almost passionate pleading.

"Yes, they talk of it because they don't know what it is. What we feel intensely we don't like to talk about. We feel because we must, we can't help it; if the feeling makes us happy we wouldn't reason ourselves out of being so; if unhappy—it's dreadful to feel unhappy—and so we try to forget, to talk or even think about it would drive us mad."

As the girl spoke, a faint flush had risen to Stephen's brow. Here, at least, he understood her perfectly. He, too, had known feelings so intense as to make of their quiet discussion, or even contemplation, an impossibility. Such had been his feeling of shame on discovering that the dead father, whose name he bore, had not been what he always believed him to be—a man of honour. Then had come the intense longing to atone in his own person, as it were, for the wrong done; to make up by a life of hard, unremitting toil for that other useless, wasted life, for which he had had to blush—a life of hard independent toil! Yes, but Stephen was a MacCullan, and had inherited much of the family spirit, of its pride, its prejudices! And fierce indeed had been the struggle to crush them out of his heart, together with the more worldly ambition fostered by his mother and college training. The

small inheritance he still possessed should redeem his father's name from dishonour—he would solicit no patronage, avail himself of no interest, but begin at the foot of the ladder, and work his way up to prove to others, but far more to himself, that a MacCullan could work like any other honest man. Keeping that one aim steadfastly before him, he bore down all opposition and gained his point, only to find how much easier it is to dream of doing something than to do it—to live by false show than hard work. Having taken life in earnest, he had to learn what a very earnest thing it is; and for years, possessing all by which men of action rise—ability, application, a stout heart, and iron will—he had failed to gain anything but the bare means of subsistence, and that how hardly! How much of suffering lay hidden in those past years of struggle, disappointment, and mortification none might ever know—he spoke of it to no one; nay, scarcely would he own it to himself. The brave heart that had borne so much could bear to be silent. He had held his head high, as it was intended by nature to be held; and made a joke of what was too serious to be talked over seriously. He had laughed at his empty pockets and obscure position, until brighter days had dawned—only dawned, however—and hope for the future, gilded with a faint line of light the dark horizon of his life.

Yes, the child was right; there are feelings too intense for words, or even thought; you can only feel.

As she looked up their eyes met, and for the second time she felt that she was understood, that there was a bond of sympathy between the child whose life could scarcely be said to have begun—for what had she ever done in it worth the doing, poor little thing?—and the man whose life, the roughest and hardest part of it at least, its struggles, losses, and temptations, lay behind him.

That one look did more towards comforting her than a thousand expressions of sympathy could have done. The clasped hands relaxed their nervous tension, the eyes softened and drooped, the quiver passed from her lips, and the happy innocent smile returned to them once more. "I am so glad," she said, softly, not to him, but to her own heart, "so glad."

At that moment Jane, who having missed her sister, had felt sure of her having gone out for a solitary stroll, and had only just caught sight of her and her companion from the bedroom window, joined them. A few commonplaces were exchanged, then Stephen gave his mother's message, adding with a smile at Mildred, "I will call again to-morrow for the answer."

"You needn't, I can give it now; we will come."

"All right," carelessly said; and the formal good-bye was carelessly said too.

"This way, Woolfert."

The dog, accustomed to go home regularly at that hour, for it was the supper-hour, and his master was the most punctual of men, as

his mistress was the most punctual of women, had naturally bent his steps in a homeward direction. But Stephen had no intention of going home just then; so he told Woolfert, and together they turned their backs upon house and supper, and went away along the cliffs, walking at an unwonted pace, until every vestige of human habitation and human life had been left behind, and nothing lay around them but that which the profane hand of man must leave untouched—rock, sky, and sea.

Something there was that must be walked down, something that had brought the red blood to his brow and cheek, and walk it down he would. Nothing had ever conquered him yet, and he had no intention of turning chicken-hearted now. Before going home the fevered blood must be cooled down, his pulse must beat with its usual regularity. As a doctor, he might have known that violent exercise is hardly the best remedy for heated blood and quickened pulse, but like many another man of science, he found it easier to act in direct opposition to his theories than in accordance with them. He would walk himself calm and cool; nothing had ever conquered him yet, and nothing should.

It was late, unusually late, when he reached Rockstone. A maid met him on the stairs—

“Missis is very sorry, sir, but she couldn’t wait up any longer. She’s one of her bad headaches.”

He nodded, and passed on.

Mrs. MacCullan heard the slow, weary-sounding

step ascending the stairs, and her door opened just a little, admitting through the aperture her voice, her nose, and a shadowy glimpse of the daintily-plaited nightcap frilling. She could not have slept in peace without seeing her boy, and bidding him good-night.

"Your supper's all ready, dear. I would have sat up for you, but my head got so very bad. You'll find the beer in the window; I put it there to keep cool."

"All right, mother, thank you. Good-night."

The red flush still lay upon his brow and cheek. He had not walked that down, at least.

He did not look after his supper, but went straight to his own room, and for more than an hour he might have been heard pacing up and down it. Fortunately for Mrs. MacCullan she did not sleep below him, for his step was none of the lightest, and to-night he walked as if at every step he were crushing something hateful and dangerous beneath his feet.

When he had said to himself all that could possibly be said upon a certain subject, he went to bed; and as he let the brown curly head drop heavily back upon the pillow, he concluded with a dark frown of determination, "Come, sir, there's enough of all this nonsense; in ten minutes you'll be fast asleep, mind that!" and in ten minutes he *was* fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIX.



STEPHEN MACCULLAN had said to himself, "in ten minutes you'll be asleep," and sure enough fast asleep he was within that time. But he had said to himself things of far greater importance. Put into few words his reasoning ran thus: "You're a hardworking man, and moreover a man who must live by and for his work. If you mean to do anything in your profession you must devote to it all you have of strength and energy. Every man has other duties incumbent upon him. It's as clearly the duty of one man to marry and make for himself a home, as it is for you not to think of such a thing for the next six years at least. You know your own nature too well to trifle with it. Ardent, impetuous, impassioned, you can never do things by halves, and you know it. Ah, you may laugh and shrug your shoulders, and pass in the world for a careless, easy-going fellow, not troubled with over much feeling; but you know better! Not the ocean, when rippling and dancing in the sunlight, is more deceptive in its outward calm; the storm raised, the waters stirred—what then! Surely the ordeals through which you have already passed might well have taught you to be strong!

You resisted the temptation to be a man of pleasure, but it's ten times more dangerous for one in your position to become a man of feeling. Feeling indeed ! a pretty graceful plaything for the man of leisure, who has time for the indulgence of every taste, however costly ; but feeling fed on broken fortunes and broken victuals—bah ! And mark you, Stephen MacCullan, when the time comes for you to marry it must be some steady, sensible woman, who'll be a help to you and your profession, not a hindrance—a good, sensible helpmate, do you hear ? not a little, wild, elfin thing like——”

Stephen did not say who, reader ! but he let his head fall heavily down upon the pillow, and added in conclusion, “ Come, sir, there's enough of all this nonsense ; in ten minutes you'll be fast asleep—mind that ! ” And in ten minutes he was fast asleep, and awoke the next morning wonderfully strengthened in his good resolutions—feeling indeed strong for all.

At the breakfast-table not a vestige remained of the past night's storm of feeling. Mrs. MacCullan did not ask what had kept him out so much longer than usual. She made it a point, and had ever since he was grown to man's estate, never to ask for any explanation of his conduct, however strange it might at times appear, and in this, as in many another thing, she showed herself a sensible as well as a clever woman. Few women, unfortunately, have the happy art of making the man's home happy— not because they neglect, but because they worry

him. Now, there's nothing a man resents more than being called over the coals, and this the women are always doing—plying them with nagging questions—fretting them with unreasonable jealousies and exactions. Is the man an unnatural monster because he kicks at such usage? Not a bit of it; leave him in peace, and you'll find him no such bad fellow after all.

Don't we all know that the ceaseless buzzing of a fly about the face will drive the most long-suffering of men to temporary insanity? And what is the buzzing of a fly compared to a woman's tongue!

Breakfast over, and Stephen about to leave the room, Mrs. MacCullan carelessly observed—

“By-the-bye, do the Grave girls come to-day—did you happen to see them?”

“Oh yes, to be sure—how stupid of me to forget. I caught sight of the little one in the garden, and proffered your invitation, which was accepted.”

“Then you'll be back as early as possible, eh? We could perhaps take an evening stroll all together.”

But he thrust his head in at the door again to say hurriedly, “Don't wait for me, I may be back or I may not—more likely the latter than the former.”

It proved the latter, as he had forewarned. The evening stroll was taken without him, for he returned even later than usual. Was it because of what he had said to himself the day before,

that he delayed his return home until he felt pretty sure that the girls had left? He was mistaken, however, for the first thing he saw on entering the drawing-room was Mildred as she sat a little apart, her eyes turned to the door, her head bent forward in the old listening attitude.

It was only an involuntary glance he gave her, then his eye turned sharply aside from her face, and rested complacently on the snub, sensible features of the elder sister.

"You've come just in time to second my proposition," said his mother, who always looked younger and brighter when in the society of those young girls. "I've been telling your cousins that it's a shame they should have been here so long without seeing Demon's Hollow; and I proposed our going there to-morrow. We could go by boat and return through the dell; it would be a glorious walk, and you and old Penryth could easily row us out. He's a famous oar, is Stephen," she added, turning to the girls; "was one of the first at Cambridge, and better known in those days for excelling in all manly sports than for application to study."

This was said with a sigh, for mothers—ay, clever and strong-minded ones too—are often far prouder of their sons being athletes than book-worms.

"I can't go to-morrow, it's impossible."

"Nonsense; have you any particular engagement for to-morrow?"

"You know that I've seldom so many hours

at my disposal as it would take to go to Demon's Hollow."

"That's a very lame excuse ; besides, you're already pledged to me for this particular excursion. It has been my pet project for more than a year, and he always promised to contrive a holiday when I could summon up courage to cross the sea in his boat."

Mrs. MacCullan was laughing—not so her son. The full lips were set, the brows knit, over the massive features lay a look of almost dogged resolve.

"Come, girls, join your voices to mine—he'd never be so uncousinly as to refuse the first favour you ask of him."

"Oh, do come—please, if you've really no particular engagement," pleaded Mildred, softly. "It would make us so happy, and it's so nice to make people happy. I was never out on the sea in a little boat, and the walk home would be so beautiful. Why won't you come? Don't you think it would be very pleasant?"

"I'm not at all sure that you'd find it so ; I think you would be far more frightened than pleased, the sea is not merely a pretty plaything, remember."

He had noticed how often she treated it as merely a pretty plaything, to be admired and petted, and trifled with.

"I'm not easily frightened, and if you were there I should not be so at all, I'm sure." And the great reverential eyes were raised one moment to his face, as he stood there so far above her,

morally as well as physically, strong in the strength of his manhood, whilst whatever she had of power lay in her very weakness. "I should feel so safe if you were there."

He wished that she had said anything else—anything less flattering, less pretty—but then of course everything she said as everything she did was pretty—and just that it was that he resented in her. Had Jane asked him in her simple straightforward way to go with them, he might have relented—he did not relent now; he only bowed in half mocking acknowledgment of the compliment, and shook back his hair with the quick defiant gesture peculiar to Stephen MacCullan when he felt the spirit of opposition rising up strong within him.

"Well, if not frightened, then sea-sick," he rejoined, with laughing irony, as if to throw contempt upon her pretty speech.

"Never mind, girls," broke in Mrs. MacCullan, sinking languidly back into her chair, half vexed at having been betrayed into a show of eagerness about what was after all a matter of such little importance. "If once he says no, there's no getting him to say yes, in that he's a true MacCullan. If I were a little more courageous I'd go independently of him; as it is we must wait till he grows more obliging, or we can find as efficient and more gallant an escort.

The young ladies now rising to go, Stephen, as in duty bound, offered to see them home. As they stopped at the gate of No. 3, Cliff Terrace, he observed, indifferently enough—"I

hope you're not very angry with me for having prevented your intended excursion."

Jane did feel half angry with him for having disappointed Mildred ; she did not therefore deign him an answer, though it was to her the question had been put ; but Mildred answered for both.

" You would not have disappointed us if you could have helped it."

Stephen coughed drily, and felt an unpleasant consciousness of being altogether unworthy of the trust so implicitly reposed in him, and quite ready to quarrel with her for rating him too highly ; but he said nothing either in self-accusation or extenuation, and having shaken hands, with Jane last, that her hearty cousinly shake might efface, if possible, the thrilling touch of those soft downy fingers, he went his way.

It is doubtful whether, if Mildred had not herself, on that evening, now more than three months ago, put her little hand so confidently into his, they would have even yet got thus far in cousinly familiarity, for Stephen was not one of your hearty sociable men who gladly stretch out the right hand of fellowship. But what excuse had he for refusing what was so unconditionally conceded to him ? Indeed, he could reflect, and often did with much inward satisfaction, that whatever advances had been made they had been made on her side, not his ; and if he had gone too far, farther than he himself knew or at least cared to own, the fault there too was more hers than his. Why had she maddened him with her pretty ways and shy wild glances ?

At Rockstone a maternal lecture awaited him a very mild one, it is true, but he would rather have been without it.

"For shame, Stephen, to disappoint your cousins when they'd so set their hearts upon going—Mildred at least—you should have seen her when I described to her the place. I declare it made me quite eloquent only looking at her, and it seemed so hard for her to be disappointed after all."

"You like the little thing—eh, mother?"

Mrs. MacCullan feared she had said too much, and agreed with more than her usual cold indifference.

"Yes, indeed—why not? She's such a pretty creature—rather strange at times, and not easy to be understood; more winning in her ways than her sister certainly, though not half as sensible or clever."

"Nonsense, mother—you can't mean that! There's more in one of Mildred's little fingers than in Jane's whole being."

It was the mother's turn now to lift her brows and look surprised, but she said nothing, feeling almost grateful to him for having also discovered something out of the common in the child who puzzled and interested her in spite of herself.

"But let's drop the subject of cousins and cousinly perfections," he added hastily, with the short laugh that was anything but pleasant to hear.

"As you will."

Mrs. MacCullan had been walking up and

down the room, her hands crossed behind her ; she now stopped short, and bending over her son's chair ran the white, well-moulded fingers through his brown curls.

With a rare and sudden impulse of fondness he drew the hand down from his head to his lips, kissed, then leant his cheek against it.

"How glad I am, mother, that I can accept your love and your caresses without any fear of what they may entail upon me. I wish life were less hard, or that I were not such a fool."

It was the first time that anything like a murmur had escaped him. His mother turned pale, and bent an anxious look upon the low-bowed face. For a moment it was averted from her, then it was raised to hers, bright with its own genial smile. And the smile reassured her. He had no doubt had something to worry him during the day. No doubt, too, that he had often such secret worries of which she knew nothing. Hesitatingly, for she was not in the habit of soliciting his confidence, she asked—"You have had anything to worry you, dear?"

"Old Betsy Biddle took it into her head to die two days before the date I had fixed—most inconsiderate of her."

"It was only the shadow of a troubled thought," concluded the mother, or he could not have shaken it off thus easily.

The next day, Tuesday, was one always devoted to paying a round of professional visits in a village some two miles off.

As a rule he went on horseback to save time ; but this once he preferred walking.

During the walk, he held another long and most important parley with himself ; and having said so much, that we could fill a whole volume with his moral reflections, he wound up thus—

“ Reason as you may, the way you’ve chosen is just the very worst and most dangerous—and you know it ! You say you’ll avoid the girl, see and hear as little of her as possible ; keep out of her way as if there were contamination in her soft little touch. Don’t you know that this is just the most cowardly resolution you could have taken and the most difficult to carry out ? Never turn your back upon a danger, however great, but boldly face and thus defy it. If you fight shy of Mildred Graves you must keep away from Rockstone too ; for she’s always there, and your mother likes to see her there, whatever she may say to the contrary, and would miss her if he ceased to come. So meet her you must, un-

you mean to absent yourself altogether, and rove beyond dispute that you’re not half the fine strong-minded fellow you flattered yourself to be ; for no sooner do the sweet looks of a woman threaten your peace of mind, than you take to flight like a veritable coward. Yes, yes, Stephen, put it as you will, you’re afraid, mortally afraid of being caught. And, mind you, there’s as much of pride, or more, than of anything else in all this ; for it’s yourself alone you fear, not for her ; if you thought there was a possibility of her returning instead of slighting

your—— Bah ! you could never make her care for you one-hundredth part as much as she does for that stiff old gentleman her father—of whom, by-the-bye, you're more than half jealous. Folly—madness!" growled Stephen, and he shook himself as did Woolfert when wanting to shake off the last drops of his morning bath. "You're a weak, miserable, cowardly fool—and the sooner you recognise the fact the better—— But, hullo !—why, there's the cross-road—and the village, and not ten paces off the house where my first visit is to be paid."


Yes, the village was gained, and he had not said half the hard uncivil things he had intended saying to himself ; but there yet remained to him the walk home, when he could make up for lost time.

That evening, at dinner, Stephen told his mother that he had contrived the day's holiday she had asked for, and was quite ready to accompany her to Demon's Hollow on the following day.

Mrs. MacCullan smiled, well pleased. "Leave the boy to himself," was her self-complacent reflexion, "and he's sure to come round."

There's no surer way for a woman to get what she wants than by offering to give it up.

CHAPTER XX.

HE following day broke clear and bright, so bright that it left nothing for heart to desire. When Mildred, awake at an early hour, saw from her bedroom window the sunlight already rippling over the waters, and speeding onward and upward in long billowy lines of light, she clapped her hands, and actually laughed for joy.

"Oh, Jane, isn't it beautiful—doesn't it seem to beckon us out? Aren't you glad that we're going?"

Jane's answer was enthusiastic enough to satisfy even Mildred. It was a day to unbend every brow, to make every heart glad with its bright wonder of earth and sky and sea.

And yet one brow was not unbent, and one heart was not glad. At an upper window of Rockstone appeared a face the reverse of bright or amiable; and the owner of that face was actually barbarous enough to wish that the May day had been less fair, less propitious for boating. His feelings being little in harmony with the scene without, he turned from it almost angrily, and lifting a huge forbidding-looking volume from the bookshelf buried himself in its contents.

He was just then studying a new work upon anatomy, and he turned over the pages savagely until he came to the figure of a skeleton, grizzly and grim—no very fitting study for such a day ; but he dwelt upon it with a certain fierce satisfaction, as proving the utter nothingness of youth and beauty, charm and grace, however perfect they might be. A face as bright as the day itself, all rippling smiles and dimples, with something weird about the eyes and the loose dropping sunlit hair, came between it and him. He laughed that face and his own madness to scorn. What was there in beauty after all ; what in a smile, a mouth, the rounded contour of a cheek, a chin, a throat, the swelling of a bosom, the slow down drooping of a lid, to drive a man mad—a sensible, rational human being mad ? The love that springs from appreciation of a noble character—ay, that he could understand ; the exchange given by one devoted heart to another—he could understand that too ; but for a man to be forced into a strong overmastering passion against his will, his better judgment, his very reason, what was that but madness ? A man is called a fool for being caught by a pretty face, a dainty foot, a bright eye : he's worse than a fool ; he's a madman, and no more to be blamed or respected than the poor lunatic who stretches up his arms towards the moon, and howls at because he can't reach it.

For more than an hour Stephen studied the gaunt skeleton, with much apparent satisfaction ; and he was studying it still when his mother's

voice disturbed him. His cousins had arrived. He did not close the book. That fleshless specimen of anatomy should be the first thing upon which his eye lighted on his return home. It was a safer study than any woman's face, if not as attractive, and would do better even than a death's head to remind him of the nothingness of all earthly charms.

As he opened the drawing-room door, the first person upon whom his eye fell was Mildred—of course; she was always in his way; she actually seemed to do it on purpose; but he had said that he would not avoid looking at her, and he did not. What was it to him that she was fair—that she had on a childishly simple print dress, a brown holland cape, and brown straw hat, beneath which her hair gleamed and rippled, like the waves that were lying out there before his window? What, indeed? He tried to conjure up the grizzly figure he had been so assiduously studying for the last hour, but failed. When her face had so persistently obstructed itself between it and him, why could it not now step in between him and her?

"I'm glad the weather favours us for our expedition," he said, not particularly to her—nay, rather to any one but her, only she had a provoking way of taking all he said to herself, and answering to it. She did so now.

"Oh yes; isn't it beautiful? I'm so glad, so happy to go. It was so good of you not to disappoint us after all. I knew you wouldn't if you could help it; I said so."

He had not approached her by a step ; he still stood at the door, as far removed from her as space allowed ; but she was approaching—softly, gradually, as it were unconsciously, until she stood very near.

“My mother wished it,” was his brief, cold answer ; and he turned aside, addressing himself directly to Jane.

Mildred’s eyes, so eagerly raised, dropped slowly away from his face ; she did not at once move from the spot where he had left her, alone, but she shrank as it were into herself, and the hands, before clasped in pleasure, seemed only now folded in dejection. She had not been used to rough words and looks, had Mildred Graves ; no one had thus spoken or looked at her, and she did not understand it.

During the walk down to the beach she kept very close to Jane, holding her hand, and never once looking up. It was as if for her all the brightness had passed out of the day.

“Sulking,” thought Stephen, for he had said he would not avoid looking at her, and he did not. “Sulking, sure enough !” and with the thought his spirits rose ; for, strange to say, unlike those among whom Mildred had hitherto lived, his mood always contrasted, instead of sympathizing, with hers. When he saw her bright and eager, or smiling softly to herself, as if at some happy welcome thought, his brow would darken, his looks and voice grow cold ; while, on the contrary, the faintest shadow over her lips or downcast lids brightened him up

wonderfully, and he would talk and laugh until the shadow had passed.

Did it flatter him now that she had taken his words to heart? anyhow his spirits rose, and he addressed her with laughing looks and light words. As he spoke a sudden light flashed over her face, but she did not raise her eyes to his as he had half hoped she would.

Mrs. MacCullan had well said that her son was a famous oar; his long vigorous strokes carried the boat bravely on over the waters. But it was no child's play; he bent to it his whole strength—every nerve, every muscle, was brought into active play—the sweat of exhaustion gathered on his brow; every stroke that carried them farther off from shore was an effort and a strain.

Is it not thus with every onward pull in life? Is it not hard, tough work—work that exhausts the man's strength, and too often shortens his life? And the woman for whom he works, who shares his gains and triumphs, and enjoys them far more than he can, upon whom lies the heat and burden of the day, has but her smiles, and love, and care to give him in return for all—and enough too if given freely. Happy is the man who can leave his worst worries behind him at the office or counting-house, and can shake the dust from off his feet on his own doormat.

That boating excursion was hard work for Stephen, but it was all play for Mildred, who bent over the side of the boat, and, dipping her hand in the sparkling waves, let the bright drops

flow through her fingers—who smiled up at the sky, and down into the waters, and sang to herself and them, and was so happy, so absorbed in her own thoughts and impressions, that she seemed to have forgotten all those who were about her.

“Well, you weren’t seasick or frightened either—so I hope you enjoyed the row as much as you expected,” said Stephen, as, the Hollow reached, he jumped out of the boat, and held out his hand to Mildred, who was nearest to him.

She did not hear; there was a vessel sailing slowly away in the distance, the sun shining on its white sails making them glitter like silver, and on the long wake it left behind, making that glitter like silver too. Mildred was watching it, oh, how wistfully! and did not therefore hear his words.

He repeated them; they would not have been spoken had he not meant to have an answer. She turned her eyes slowly from the distant vessel to his face, but there lay in them still the dreamy look eyes take when gazing at something far away.

“Oh yes, thank you; it was beautiful! and I enjoyed it so much, more than I could ever enjoy a row again, for it could never again be the first.”

She put out her hand to him mechanically, then drew it back, “I can’t get out here,” she said, poutingly, “the water’s so deep, and—I should get my feet wet.” As she spoke she

looked down at the little feet plainly visible below the fashionably short skirt, then lower down still at the water rocking and gurgling around the boat.

"No, no, you shan't get your boots wet, not even the tips of them, give me both your hands and make a jump for it. You'll reach the dry land in safety, I promise you."

Still she looked doubtful, pouting her lips, and looking down into the water, then up into his face with wistful sidelong glances.

Take care, Stephen! you said, reasonably enough, that you would not avoid her, but you never said that you would play with her as you're doing now. Edge tools—mind the proverb! and what tool so sharp or piercing as a woman's eye!

Her hands waved slowly towards him, then as he almost touched them, they were again withdrawn, and she shrank back. "I can't, it's so very, very far to jump. It seems almost impossible not to fall in. Jane, please go first."

"To get her feet wet instead of you if Stephen MacCullan fails to keep his word—and to give you confidence in that word if he does not."

He was laughing; but his cheek was flushed, and his face wore the half-defiant look with which he met every opposition, however trifling. He moved a step nearer, his hands still outstretched, "Come."

"For shame, Stephen—why frighten the poor child?"

"I'll jump first, I'm not frightened, not a bit," interrupted Jane, briskly.

Stephen turned from the younger to the elder sister. "Thank you, for your confidence," but before he could take the hand Jane held out, Mildred had stepped in between them. "I'm not frightened now—indeed, I'm not. I was just a little at first, but I'll trust you." And bending towards him with something of eagerness, she held out both her hands.

He took them, wee fragile things that they were, into his strong broad palm, holding them close and firm. "Thank you," he said again, but in what a different tone! and his cheek flushed and his eye kindled. It might have been only the reflection of the sky, red and glowing, that illumined his countenance, or it might have been something else. A light jump, and she stood on the very spot that he had indicated, and not even the tips of her boots were wet, as he had promised.

"I hope you don't expect from me the same airy flight," laughed Mrs. MacCullan.

No, Stephen certainly did not; his interest in the matter was now over. With some difficulty he and Penryth drew the boat up high and dry, and Mrs. MacCullan could land with her usual stately deliberateness.

Demon's Hollow was a wildly picturesque spot much visited in the season, for besides its individual attraction there was a tragic legend connected with it, and people do dearly love the horrible—do dearly love to have a cold, creeping

sensation sent like an electric shock down the spine—to be forced into an irresistible impulse leading them to cry, “Oh, dear!” “Oh, lor!” “Bless my soul!” and so on.

“Now, Stephen, tell your cousins the legend of the place.”

They were all sitting upon a rock which seemed to have been formed by nature for the express purpose of accommodating visitors. Mrs. MacCullan and Jane sat together, Mildred a little apart; Stephen, who now half regretted the eagerness into which he had been betrayed, and which was so contrary to his principles and newly-formed resolutions, unceremoniously turned his back upon the young lady, glad to have her face behind, instead of in front of him; but just as if she divined his ungallant intention and were resolved to frustrate it, as she very often did in a pretty, provoking way, so unconscious of offence—scarcely had he begun than she came stealing round, and sat down at Jane’s feet, resting her soft cheek against her knee in the full range of the speaker’s eyes—which speaker, though finding it quite a proper, natural thing to turn his back upon a young lady of seventeen, had no possible excuse for turning it upon the whole company of which she made one. One moment the legend was interrupted, then he laughed, coloured slightly, and it was at Mildred he was looking, right down into her face, when it was resumed.

“Well, they were, as I have said, a newly-married couple whose inclinations or circum-

stances perhaps, led them to choose a week here in preference to one at Scarborough, or a trip abroad. Weather favouring them, wind and tide ditto, a sail on the water was proposed by the bridegroom, and rapturously encored by the bride. What more appropriate to the occasion ! She would herself go down to the beach, and choose her boat. It must be the little darling she had seen the day before freshly painted red, white, and blue, with the new white sails, and the smart young boatman in the sweet, striped shirt. Fortune favoured them in this also ; they got the smart boat and boatman, and being the very happiest couple that can possibly be imagined, it followed as a matter of course that they chose, as points of interest to be visited, those places bearing the most awful sounding names—Demon's Hollow and the Mouth of Hell, which lies there, further up the coast. But the Hollow gained, the bride, who had found the sail far more romantic than pleasant, turned fainthearted, and, sinking limp and despondent upon this very rock, refused to explore further. The bridegroom, on the contrary, who had stood the heaving test bravely, and found himself no way the worse for it, who moreover having paid the double fare in advance, felt, true Cockney that he was, half ashamed of going back without having taken out the full interest of his money in seeing all that was to be seen for it, had an unconquerable desire to proceed to the Mouth of Hell, and, according to the spirit of the age, take a cautious peep into its interior, then boast loudly of the exploit. But how leave

the young bride alone even for half an hour! A playful altercation ensued. She clasped her hands and cried, 'Oh, do!' He clasped her waist and cried, 'I can't!' They were such a devoted pair! The dispute ended by his sacrificing his will to hers, as in duty bound. No husband must ever say no to his wife's yes; that is a bargain signed and sealed with the first kiss—the return he is in honour bound to make for that one *yes* that gave her to him for life. So the conjugal yes having won the day, the bridegroom started, and the bride stayed behind, and seated on this very stone, awaited his return. It is to be hoped that the first peep into the Mouth of Hell gave the young gentleman more gratification than it is generally supposed to do. Anyhow his curiosity was not easily satisfied, for he peeped and he peered, and he dug and he chipped, and he carved his name on the outside of the cavern and in the inside, and was altogether so engrossed that he quite forgot the flight of time until reminded of it by the smart young boatman asking him for the hour, which he told him all wrong, his watch having unfortunately stopped. Unfortunately, too, the boatman was a stranger in the place, and altogether a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow, who was quite content to sit and smoke whilst his fare, who was of an inquiring turn of mind, whose holidays were rare, and who had, moreover, as we have before hinted, paid pretty high for the spree, peered and cut and hammered and dug to his heart's content. Meanwhile the young wife sat here and waited,

and time went on; and the tide rose always higher and higher."

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted Mildred, rising to her knees in her eagerness. "I know—the young wife is drowned. The water rises higher and higher, comes nearer and nearer—just as you described it once before—do you remember? The husband comes back too late."

"Exactly; but it was hardly fair of you to interrupt me thus, at the most graphic part. Your dénouement was too abrupt."

"And she was really drowned, poor thing?" asked Jane, whose interest in love stories had wonderfully increased the last few months—ever since—— Well, why disguise it? We know that there is nothing like a fellow feeling for awakening interest.

"Yes, she was really drowned. Her body floated out to meet the boat."

"With outstretched arms, and streaming hair, and wide-open, upturned eyes. I've so often seen just such a picture when looking out to sea." It was Mildred who said this.

"Indeed, and do your thoughts *often* take such a tragic turn?"

"I don't know; when they come I can't send them away—not always—and I can't help their coming. But I don't pity her so very much. She waited and watched and hoped until the end came."

"But too soon—that's just it. Why should it not have waited till the first flush of happiness

was over, till they had had their first quarrel, for instance? It would have been so much easier to die then."

"I don't think that," Mildred said, musingly. "I think it must be so much easier to die when you are happy than to outlive your happiness."

"And is it a true story, or only a tradition of the place?"

"Neither true story nor tradition, Miss Jane, but simply an advertisement that appeared last year in the London papers. Your sister's dénouement was, as I said, too abrupt; after the catastrophe comes the question—Who was in fault—the boatman, the bridegroom, the bride? No, only the bridegroom's watch. And after the question comes the moral. Never buy your watches anywhere but at Morrison's and Co., Church Street, Fleet Street, or risk the same fate as that of the luckless couple."

"Do you know, Stephen, that you're the most unbearable fellow in the world," broke in Mrs. MacCullan, more than half vexed. "You turn everything into ridicule. Why not tell the story as it is, without adding to it any nonsense of your own?"

"And it's really only an advertisement!" said Mildred, opening her great eyes very wide. "I'm so glad—it's so much better that it should be only that than a real, sad story! And jumping up impetuously, every shade of gravity swept from her face, she ran down to the shore, and fell to playing with the waves, as she could

never have done had she been obliged to think of them as wild and cruel.

Stephen stayed on where he was, talking to Jane and his mother, and never once turning to look after the little elfin sprite who had escaped him. But he was far from being satisfied, either with himself or her, and he actually regretted the ingenious supplement that had so suddenly changed her mood, and sent her down with that bright eager face to search for shells and weeds, in which he took not the slightest interest. Gladly would he have recalled her to Jane's feet, for all he had appeared so superbly unconscious of, or indifferent to, her presence—and though he had laughed at her girlish sentimentality, and turned it into ridicule, he would have been content to laugh on for hours with her sitting before him, almost as much at his feet as those of Jane, the corners of her mouth drawn down to a sympathetic curve, the small fingers twining and untwining about each other, her bosom rising and falling with a quick agitated motion as she leant it against her sister's knee. As she did not return, but disappeared altogether behind the rocks, he proposed their making a move, if they did not intend in their turn to be surprised by the tide.

“Call her, Stephen.”

He did so, and felt a thrill of pleasure when he saw how readily she answered to the call, running up, her face all aglow with health and pleasure, and her hands so full of weeds, shells, and other treasures.

"Will you carry them for me, Jane?"

Jane put her hand to her side—then looked distressed.

"I've no pocket dear, and—and I quite forgot to bring a handkerchief—how tiresome!"

"Have you no handkerchief or pocket yourself?" Stephen asked of Mildred, with a quick lifting of the brows and a queer smile about his lips.

"Yes—but——"

"You would rather fill your sister's pockets than your own."

"I carried some pebbles once when Jane wasn't there, and—they were so heavy."

"Poor Miss Jane!" laughed Stephen, with a look of serio-comic sympathy. "I actually begin to view you in the light of a victim. Your sister should hire a donkey with panniers for her collections—or cease collecting. What is not worth taking home is certainly not worth stooping to pick up."

Her lips had once more assumed the downward curve, and opening the small hands alternately, she looked ruefully at their contents.

"They're so pretty now that they're all wet and glistening—it seems such a pity to throw them away."

"Then put them in your pocket or pocket-handkerchief."

"But when I get home they'll be all dry and ugly, and I shan't care to look at them again."

He bent on her a keen searching look, and

the cheek that could flush at any strong passing impression could pale as rapidly ; it was pale now as he said—

“ I should be very sorry to put my happiness into your hand—to have it lying where those poor shells are lying now, smiled upon so long as they shine and please your eye, then thrown away as worthless.”

What had she said to anger him ? Was not her remark a perfectly innocent and natural one ? Are not all things in life valued according to their present charm or beauty ? The charm gone—where is that faithful heart that will value them still ? Mercifully is it ordained that we bury our dead away out of sight—dead affections—dead hopes—dead flowers. Were we to gather to our heart all earth’s poor withered leaves, as we do her bright summer blossoms, would not that warm, living heart soon cease to beat beneath their cold dead weight ?

Mildred looked once more at the glistening shells and weeds ; then spreading her dainty handkerchief out upon the sand, laid them in with a tender, almost reverent hand.

When Jane offered to carry them she answered, “ Oh no,” in a quick, soft underbreath that was little more than a whisper.

The walk home was a wonderful walk ; not one of the party ever quite forgot it. Jane and Mrs. MacCullan often spoke of it afterwards, Stephen and Mildred never. Yes, it was a wonderful walk—round the back of the cliffs, out of sight and even sound of the sea, far down

into a flowering dell, every inch of grass over which they passed a perfect wonder of moss and blossom.

It was a wild, wandering, uncivilized walk—not leading along any beaten track, not made smooth and easy for the visitor's foot. There were stiles and high steep banks to climb—riverlets to be got over—then long quiet rests on the sun-streaked grass—when, throw himself where he might, Stephen was sure to find Mildred near him—so near, that once his elbow rested on the skirt of her dress, and once, putting out his hand with a quick sudden gesture it fell upon her lap and touched the little white bundle, and the hands that were so lovingly folded about it.

Whose fault was it that those two always somehow got together, closer together than the others? He certainly did not seek her out; on the contrary, he would even have avoided her, but that he had sworn to himself that he would not.

The fault of this, and many another such like mystery, lies in the fact that all the strong irresistible impulses existing in nature exist equally in human nature—electricity, magnetism, animal attraction—are they not what we call sympathy, love, &c.? the insensible drawing of one magnetic body to another? All such natural attractions, therefore, defying the laws of reason or calculation, are of a strong, even violent character, possessing somewhat of the tremendous force and vitality which exist in nature itself, and call all other powers into

being. Fearful, indeed, is the struggle when mind and matter, reason and a strong animal instinct meet face to face, and in nine cases out of ten the latter overpowers the former, being the very germ of our individual existence—as the tender germ of nature, so long hidden beneath the cold hard sod, breaks through it with irresistible force when the hour comes. These are mere passing reflections that can have no connexion with that soft, childish creature, Mildred Graves, with the pouting baby lips and baby hands, with the smooth, unshadowed brow, and shy, drooping lids—the little wayward cousin who always comes nestling up to Stephen MacCullan's side, just as if she were jealous of his attention.

They had scrambled up the cliff to see the sun go down over the sea, and a glorious going down it was!—and in the dim, half-misty twilight they were going home. Already they had left the wildness of nature behind them, and the first white cottage was peeping out from among the orchard trees, when Mildred once more stole up to Stephen's side, so close that he could feel the contact of her soft shoulder against his arm, and feeling it he thrilled and frowned.

“Are you sorry now that you found time to accompany us when the walk has made us all so happy?”

“Yes, very sorry, more sorry than you can ever understand,” he answered her in a sharp suppressed tone; and as he felt the rebellious

blood rise in a crimson flood to his cheek, he threw back his head and turned his eyes, all dark and passionate as he knew them at that moment to be, upon her, right down upon her face. Eye answering to eye in one wild startled glance—the red flush of passion on the man's cheek, reflected on that of the woman—a thrill, a quiver, a catching of the breath, a quick movement of the hand to the bosom—thus are hearts irrevocably bound in one fatal moment.

“More sorry than you could *ever* understand,” repeated Stephen, and removing from her face the magnetic power of his gaze, he turned away. There had been no response to that first passionate impulse, nothing but a shy appealing look from under the long lashes in answer to his words. She kept on for some time at his side, but he never once turned towards her, nor did he speak another word until a brief good-bye was exchanged in Cliff Terrace.

Mildred's pretty glistening shells and weeds were quite dry and ugly when she opened her handkerchief on the bed, kneeling down beside it to do so; but they were not thrown away—they were fondled and caressed and mused over, and then they were laid aside. After that they were not looked at again, but at least they were not thrown away as worthless.

CHAPTER XXI.



T was the end of June, and Badestone was filling fast. It was not yet by any means as full as it would be a month hence, for the London season was not yet quite over, and so long as the select remained in London, Badestone, which is a very select seaside resort, could not be pronounced really full. Still, it wore a very different aspect from what it had done a month before; then it was empty, now it was filling—the hotels, the houses, the bazaar, the esplanade, the cliffs—all filling, filling fast. Carriages rolled along the roads; figures dotted the face of the country in all directions—male figures, female figures, liliputian figures, figures of biped and quadruped. It was what Mrs. Morton called a “moving scene,” and she was in her glory. The grey summer silk gown, the Doctor’s last Christmas gift to her before she left his house, very rich of texture and ample in the gathers, more so a great deal than was either necessary or becoming, was brought forth, together with a silk mantle profusely trimmed with jet, which jet trimmings were altogether out of fashion; but, as she said, they always looked rich. And as the poor thing had never known

what it was to be rich, or anything at all like it, she may well be excused for snapping at the shadow when the substance lay so far beyond her reach.

But in proportion as the place gained in the eyes of the widow it lost in those of her charges. Their favourite haunts, hitherto regarded as private property, were invaded; their favourite seats taken. Heads were stretched over the garden railing when they walked there; eyes looked up at the drawing-room window when they sat at it. In one spot only they felt safe—in aunt MacCullan's garden—that great wild garden, so entirely shut away from the outer world by its high surrounding wall, and as if even this were not enough, in every corner of it were secret, out-of-the-way nooks, into which you could creep, and feel so sure of being hid that you would have defied the eyes of the most eager hide-and-seek players.

In this garden, so lone, so shadowy, so cool, even on the hottest days, Mildred would spend many hours of every week, nay, almost of every day. She seldom troubled Mrs. MacCullan in the house, for which act of consideration that lady was truly grateful; but would come stealing in at a postern gate, and, unless particularly sought for, would keep so well out of the way that no one saw or heard aught of her. And whilst she spent her hours in this rather dull, but to her altogether satisfactory manner, what was Jane about? Had you seen her at this time, something would have told you—perhaps the unusual briskness of her tread, the little toss

her head would give every now and then, or the set business-look diffusely spread over the snub features—that she had found work—useful, active, parochial work—such as her soul delighted in. By some happy chance she had popped upon “a poor deserving family,” a family who stood in need of knitted stockings, garments, counsel, instruction, all, in short, that she was so ready to give. Cutting, arranging, teaching, physicking, the hours spent by Mildred in Rockstone garden passed so quickly for Jane that she would sometimes be quite surprised to see her return at the end of them, and, pushing her light curly hair from her forehead, which was quite damp with much care and cutting, for the weather was hot, she would say, with a little contented sigh, “I’ve been so busy.”

“So have I—so busy,” Mildred would answer, smiling rather to herself than her companion. Yes, busy with her own idle dreamings, which made up the sum of her pretty, useless life. Not that she knew that it was useless, poor child; it was Stephen who first opened her eyes to the fact.

He and Mildred very seldom met now. As the place filled he had little time to himself, and that little was not given to her. He had said that he would not avoid her, nor did he; but neither did he seek her out—that would have been altogether against his principles; and the less he saw of her the less he thought of her, which was satisfactory.

When sometimes, on his return home, his

mother would say to him, "I've been sitting with Mildred in the garden; I think she's there still—wont you go and see?" his general answer was that he had something better to do—he had had enough of lady patients without looking after lady visitors.

When he happened to find the three ladies together in the garden, he would stay and while away an hour with them, sometimes even more, and then, at Mildred's request, the tea would be brought out and spread under the great walnut tree, and, Jane presiding at the urn, Mildred would hand round the cups. At first he had been rather shocked at the idea of a young lady waiting upon him, but she had persisted in such a pretty, childish way, and looked so pained and disappointed at his first remonstrance, that he did not care to repeat it. So she gained her point, and whenever they drank tea in the garden his cup was brought to him by the little hand that had sent that strange electric thrill through him at its first touch, marking a new era in his life.

One evening he returned home later and more thoughtful than usual. He had visited many patients during the day; he had seen sickness and suffering of many kinds, to that he was accustomed, and it did not in general affect him much, but something he had seen that day had affected him deeply.

Lost in anxious thought, it was with a slow step and clouded brow he passed through the postern gate and entered the garden. Not far

from the gate was a great elm tree, beneath which was a bench, and on this bench sat Mildred, but he did not see her. His thoughts were very far from her at that moment—what connexion could there possibly be between her and that other woman he had seen? and that other woman had all his thoughts—his tenderest, his most earnest thoughts—just then.

“Good evening.”

He knew who it was addressed him, but there was no start, no change of countenance whatever. He looked down upon the eager, upturned face with grave, absent eyes, and quietly echoed her greeting.

“Aunt told me to wait for you here, and tell you that she’s gone to change the books at the library. She’ll be back in half an hour.”

“Thank you,” and he was passing on.

Sensitively alive to every outward impression, instinctively feeling every change in those about her, she now felt that Stephen’s looks were cold, and his voice unfriendly; and placing her little person in his way so that he could not pass on, she added hurriedly—

“Aunt told me to wait and tell you this, or I shouldn’t have stopped you, you know. I’m going now. Good-bye. Jane will be wanting me.”

“I think not; I met Miss Jane in the village carrying a parcel half as big as herself. I offered to relieve her of it, but she scorned my aid. I hope she has not very far to go; such a monster parcel must be worse even than your pebbles.”

Stephen was gradually thawing. What possible excuse had he for being stiff and icy to the poor little cousin who stood so meekly before him, with folded hands and a shadow over her soft face which said plainly enough—"Why are you so cross with me?"

"She said that if she'd time she'd take it to them herself. They're to wear their new clothes to-morrow."

"Who?"

"The little Dorkers."

"And who are the little Dorkers?" persisted Stephen, with an amused, puzzled smile.

"Oh, don't you know? They are old Parker's grandchildren—old Parker, the cripple fisherman. Jane found them out by chance. They're so poor, so poor, and there's no father or mother or grandmother, only the poor old cripple grandfather, and they can't pay to go to school; so Jane teaches them, and as they were quite in rags, she has made them each a set of clothes, and that was the big bundle you saw."

"Very kind of Miss Jane!"

"Oh yes; she's so glad, so happy to be able to do something."

"And you helped her in the good work?"

"I, oh no! She teaches them in the morning when I'm down in the dell, and sometimes they're so naughty, she says; but then they were never taught better, and they must find it so dull sitting in a room learning when the sun's shining over the sea and cliffs, and down in the dell where they used to play in their rags and be so

happy. I was there this morning. It was so still and bright. The visitors don't come there, and there are so many strange beautiful insects and flowers——”

“Did your sister also visit much among the poor at home?” interrupted Stephen, uncere-
moniously.

“Oh yes; half the parish is under her care. She helped papa and the clergyman so much, I don't know how they can have got on without her.”

“And you—did you never visit your father's patients? Had you no wish to help him in his work?”

“I couldn't.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn't bear it. One day Jane took me to see a poor family, so poor that they had nothing to eat or to wear, and the mother was in bed with cloths bound round her head, and such an awful look upon her face. I shall never forget it; I try to, but I can't.”

“The recollection must be an unpleasant one indeed,” was Stephen's cold, stern answer. “The suffering we dare not relieve may well become a painful memory. I pity you Miss Graves for having no better.”

Was he angry with her, and what had she said to make him so? She ventured a timid look up into his face. Yes, he was angry, or his face would never look like that. She had never seen it so stern before, had never perhaps seen any face so stern when turned upon her, for she

was unused to harsh looks and words was Mildred Graves.

Her lids quivered just a little as she dropped them to the ground, her lips too quivered as she said, "You are angry with me?"

"Angry! what right have I to be so? I only regret that you should so entirely have mistaken the true purpose of life, making it consist in mere selfish gratification, the gratification of the eye, the senses, of everything but the heart."

"Is it my fault that I feel so? Papa told me that mamma was just the same. It's so dreadful to see people suffer——"

"Without trying to relieve them—yes."

"Mamma never went among the poor; she couldn't bear it."

Never before had the memory of the dead mother pleaded in vain for the poor little daughter who had inherited so much from her besides her eyes and smile. But Stephen knew nothing of all this. Life to him was a stern and noble reality, its duties a solemn reality too, ay, the greatest and least of them. He did not pursue the subject further, deeming it altogether useless. He turned to go, saying as he did so—

"I'm glad that cousin Jane is so good to the poor. Such a woman makes a good friend, a good wife. I'm glad I judged her character aright."

Cousin Jane. It was the first time he had called either of the cousins by her Christian name, and the voice so harsh and cold when speaking to her, Mildred, had grown soft—oh, so soft—in uttering it.

Was it a pang of jealousy that shot at that moment through Mildred's heart? A pang it certainly was, but as she herself did not know of what nature, we have no right to find for it a name.

Stephen would have pronounced her incapable of jealousy as of every other strong passion, and this conviction it was that made him throw from him the thought of her almost with rage. It was not, however, of her or her feelings that he was now thinking as he moved away, forgetting even in his abstraction to bid her good-bye, but her voice recalled him.

"I wish I did not feel so. I wish I could be more like Jane and papa—I wish I could."

Did Mildred, who had never dreamt that her life should or could be other than it was, begin at last dimly to realize that it might have in it something besides flowers and birds and gay-winged insects? Surely some such suspicion of the truth floated vaguely through the words so sharply, almost passionately uttered, "I wish I did not feel so!"

Stephen turned to her once more.

"You shouldn't wish that. There's no true, deep feeling that could not be made to work for good, if only we knew how to use it."

"I wish I knew how."

"By making it serve your ends instead of allowing yourself to be enslaved by it. The very feelings that have prevented your life being useful, should have made it eminently so. You would have made quite an ideal little sister of mercy," he added in a lighter tone, as he saw

how very wistful and troubled a look his words had called up into the great eyes.

She shook her head despondingly.

"I have often seen in fancy an ideal little sister of mercy sitting at the bedside of some poor, suffering patient of mine. Very soft of tread she was, very soft of voice too. The suffering she couldn't bear to look upon she relieved. As the thought of pain was intolerable to her, her little hand was so gentle, oh, so gentle, in soothing it. Liking to see brightness and happiness around her, she carried them with her wherever she went. If sympathy for my poor, suffering patient made her sad one moment, she found it all the easier to make him smile the next. You can't think what a bright, soft, invaluable assistant my ideal little sister is——"

"Like Jane?"

Another pang, a swelling of the bosom, plainly visible below the light muslin dress, a swelling of the lip too.

"Like Jane?" for Stephen was looking at her, and had not answered the question.

"Perhaps."

"She's very good," Mildred said, in a low, humble tone. "I could never be like her."

"Until you exchange dreams for reality."

"The dreams are so beautiful——"

"And so vain," Stephen added, almost bitterly. "Dreamt out, awakened from, and the rest a blank. You can't go on dreaming until death or old age overtakes you. God have mercy on your wasted life if you do."

"I did not know that it was wicked to dream. I always feel so much happier and better when thinking than speaking, and I have sometimes thought"—here her voice dropped, and her eyes, raised slowly from the ground, wandered away onward and upward until lost in the boundless realms of abstract speculation—"I have sometimes thought that death must be a succession of such dreams, each one higher and more perfect than the last, leading us on and on until the one great reality—immortality in eternity—lies before us."

"But we're talking of life now, not death," came Stephen's blunt interruption.

"And who knows whether life is, after all, anything more than a dream—one among the many."

"To you it may well appear so," interrupted her once more the man's cold, stern voice; "you who have never known or cared to know what life really is. Have you ever known a reality more real, more beautiful, than anything of which you ever dreamt?"

"Yes, its love." Then, as if the words, or the deep hidden thoughts of which they were but the expression, were something altogether too sacred for further discussion, she picked up her hat, and without another word or look left the garden by the postern gate.

Stephen did not try to stop her, he did not even offer to accompany her. No sooner had the gate closed upon the slight, girlish figure than he turned towards the house; but before

he had reached the porch a thought struck him. "She may be of use to me." It was not of Mildred he was thinking. "Come, old fellow," as Woolfert came bounding to his feet, "We'll go for our walk first, and call on our way back."

Very quietly and demurely had Mildred walked until the end of the lane was reached; then, with a quick backward look, to make sure that no one was behind her, she turned sharply round, and sped away down the cliffs to the deep shady dell, where, as she had said, visitors never came. Here she was alone—quite alone—there was no one to see or hear her; and, flinging herself with a low, sharp cry upon the ground, she pressed her face down upon the long damp grass.

"He said that my life was useless, selfish, wasted. Papa never said so, or Jane; but he did, and—and he's so good, oh, so good! He called her cousin Jane: he never called me Mildred, never. Oh, if I could only be like her, that—that he might not be angry with me; but it's no use wishing that or anything else now. If he thinks my life so worthless only because I like to be alone with the flowers and birds and insects and my own thoughts, what would he think of me if he knew all—all? Oh, why did I ever see that cruel, wicked man who made me wicked too; or why did he not drag me down with him when he was so near—so near that the touch of my hand made him fall? I can never be good like Jane, and he will never call me cousin Mildred—never!"

And lower and lower, deeper and deeper down into the long damp perfumed grass she crushed the poor tear-stained face; for Mildred was crying, had been crying ever since she lay there, not quietly or decorously, as might have been expected, but with a wild vehemence of passion that left her all trembling and exhausted when the storm was over.

Foolish child! what was Stephen McCullan to her that she should thus care for what he said or thought of her? Methinks he would have been somewhat startled could he have seen her lying along the ground, he who believed her incapable of anything like passion.

When she got home it was very late, and of course she got an extra big hug for having caused Jane more than an hour's uneasiness.

"I was just going to look for you. Stephen McCullan was here, and said that you had probably gone along the cliffs to meet me, for that you had left Rockstone more than an hour ago."

"What else did he say?"

"Oh, nothing that would interest you; it was a mere business visit."

"But what did he say?"

"He came to speak to me about a poor girl, a new patient of his, who—who is very ill. But never mind that now; it's a sad story."

"Tell it me, dear."

It was not often that Jane looked surprised, but she looked so now. Hitherto, at the first words—a sad story—Mildred's hands had been

imploringly outstretched with a piteous, "Oh yes, dear, I daresay; but don't tell me, please; I couldn't bear it;" and now she actually asked to have it told her.

"You would really like to hear?"

"Yes."

It was a very low little yes, but very decided withal.

"He says that it's not a hopeless case, but a very sad one. He seems so much interested. It's a poor young dressmaker, sent down here by a kind London physician. To support a drunken father and an idiot brother, she overtasked her strength, working night and day, with little rest or food between whiles. When she began to suffer from her head she said nothing, for the work had to be done; there was no choice between that and starvation. So she bound up the poor head in wet cloths, that the pain might not prevent her sewing, and stitched on, until one day she was found in a raging fever by a fellow lodger. In the ravings of delirium all her story came out. She was taken to the hospital, and when somewhat recovered, was sent down here for change of air. He says her spine is affected, but with care and time he could cure her. She still suffers very much, but she's so patient, never complaining, and only anxious for her father and brother."

"He asked you to go and see her?"

"Yes; he said that we must work out her cure together; that it's so hard sometimes for a man to work all alone, and that a woman can

do so much. He spoke so tenderly of the poor sick girl, and seemed so sorry for her. I shall go and see her to-morrow."

"I will go with you."

"You!"

Jane twisted her features into such a comical look of amaze that Mildred, quick to seize every impression, grave or gay, burst out laughing; then, though laughing still, her eyes filled, and throwing herself down at Jane's feet, she hid her face in her lap, just as she used to do in the old days of childhood before that great sorrow had come between them, and never since.

"Oh, Jane, why did you not tell me that my life was useless, selfish, wasted? Why did you let me go on thinking that it was beautiful and good when it was only useless?"

"Silly child! Whatever put such an idea into your head?"

"He said so; he said that my life was useless, and selfish, and wasted."

"Who—Stephen MacCullan? Never mind him, dear. He's a hard, practical, professional man, you know, who takes life so very, very seriously, and can't understand any life but one of hard work. Why should you care for what he says?"

"I don't know," said Mildred; but she bent her head lower, and the words, low too, were almost a sob, "I don't know." Nor did she.

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